One Small Step Can Change Your Life

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THE KAIZEN WAY

Robert Maurer, Ph.D.

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for Mort Maurer, my father, who helped me to see the power of kaizen in the workplace, and my mother, Miriam, who demonstrated the strength of kaizen in relationships

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PREFACE

"Small things with great love. . . . It is not how much we do, but how much love we put into the doing. And it is not how much we give, but how much love we put into the giving. To God there is nothing small."

—Mother Teresa

"Change is hard!"

It's a sentiment so widely accepted as fact that we don't question whether or not it's actually true. And there are good reasons why many of us see change as a mountain to climb. Consider New Year's resolutions, which almost always fail. The average American makes the same resolution ten years in a row without success. Within four months, 25 percent of resolutions are abandoned. And those who succeed in keeping their resolutions usually do so only after five or six annual broken promises.

Organizational change in business is also perceived as difficult. Popular business books preach quick-fix solutions to managers looking for fast ways to motivate resistant staff. Often these books take the form of business fables, employing simple storylines and cute animals to convey their message. Some become bestsellers, like John Kotter's *Our Iceberg Is Melting,* which neatly encapsulates the prevailing wisdom of this genre: Employees must be convinced of an imminent emergency—a threat—in order to be motivated to make some change.

But contrary to popular opinion, change—whether personal or in business—doesn't have to be agonizingly painful. Nor must it happen only as the result of scare tactics employed to shock ourselves—or our colleagues—into meaningful action. The pages you are about to read will shatter the myth that change is hard, effectively removing the roadblocks that keep individuals and work groups from achieving the results they seek. You'll learn that change doesn't have to happen only as a radical response to a dire situation.

This book will show you how to harness the power of kaizen: using small steps to accomplish large goals. Kaizen is an ancient philosophy captured in this powerful statement from the *Tao Te Ching*: "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Though it is rooted in ancient philosophy, it is just as practical and effective when applied to our hectic modern lives.

Kaizen has two definitions:

- using very small steps to improve a habit, a process, or product
- using very small moments to inspire new products and inventions

I'll show you how easy change can be when the brain's preference for change is honored. You'll discover many examples of how small steps can achieve your biggest dreams. Using kaizen, you can change bad habits, like smoking or overeating, and form good ones, like exercising or unlocking creativity. In business, you'll learn how to motivate and empower employees in ways that will inspire them. But first, let's examine some common beliefs about change, and how kaizen dismantles all the obstacles we may have spent years putting in our way.

Myth #1: Change Is Hard

Let's look at just one example of how change can be easy, requiring little time, self-control, or discipline. A series of recent studies have found that people who spend a large part of the day sitting are at an increased risk of heart attack and even early death. Somewhat paradoxically, a Mayo Clinic study revealed that going to the gym for an hour a day did not reduce the risks associated with sitting for six or more hours a day.

But this seems counterintuitive to everything we think we know about exercise. Yet the issue here is not exercise, but prolonged sedentary periods. When we're sitting, our muscles go into a form of hibernation, causing our bodies to shut down the enzyme (called KK1) that breaks down some of the fat in the blood. In addition, our metabolic rate and the rate of good cholesterol manufacture both slow down. The explanation for these dramatic findings is that the body requires the downward flow of gravity. Without it, the heart is compromised, blood volume is reduced, muscles begin to atrophy—even bone mass is adversely affected.

The solution to this scary picture is kaizen. Simply standing from a sitting position doubles your metabolic rate. Go for even a short walk and you have more than doubled the rate again. The moral of the story: The solution to the health risks posed by excessive sitting is not huge and unmanageable—i.e., a full hour at the gym each day—but rather small and doable. Getting up from the desk every hour or so, pacing, even fidgeting all help the body to function effectively.

In our "bigger is better" culture of IMAX movies, supersize meals, and extreme makeovers, it's hard to believe that *small* steps can lead to big changes. But the wonderful reality is that they can.

Myth #2: The Size of the Step Determines the Size of the Result, So Take Big Steps for Big Results

Many business articles preach the widely accepted wisdom that one can bet small (incremental changes, like those encouraged by kaizen) or bet big (aka innovation) and that innovation is the path to survival, growth, and creativity. In our personal lives, too, we often bet big, putting all our money on innovation—such as a crash diet or intense workout program—in the hope of achieving a big result. But extreme diets and workout programs often fail since they require huge quantities of willpower, and often, the willpower doesn't last. Consider that, for many years, the American Heart Association recommended 30 minutes of exercise at least five days a week. No one I know has the time (or very generous employers) that would permit this recommendation to be fulfilled. Who has the time during a busy workday to drive to the gym, change into workout clothes, exercise, shower, get dressed, and drive back to work?

Enter research from the Mayo Clinic that demonstrates that moving throughout the day can bring dramatic results. By tracking the subjects' activity levels through the pedometers they wore, researchers found that people who were lean but never set foot in the gym simply moved more during the day. They paced while on the phone, parked further from the store entrance, and stood more during the day than subjects who were overweight. This resulted in, on average, a 300-calorie-a-day difference which, over the course of a year, could result in a difference of 30 pounds.

The kaizen takeaway? While more exercise is better than less, small amounts make a difference. A Taiwanese study of 416,000 adults found that those who exercised 15 minutes a day lived three years

longer than those who exercised less. And those 15 minutes do not have to be done all at once! Exercising for 3 minutes at a time, adding up to 15 minutes or more, can have clear and dramatic health benefits. And these strategies don't require huge expenditures of time, energy, willpower, and discipline. See page 17 to find out how one of my clients, Julie—a single mom with overwhelming responsibilities—managed to fit exercise into her schedule. Her entry to working out was so easy and painless that Julie knew she could not fail. That's kaizen in action.

Myth #3: Kaizen Is Slow; Innovation Is Quicker

Perhaps the most dramatic example of what can happen when innovation is used and abused is Toyota, a company that calls kaizen its soul. For most of its history after World War II, Toyota exemplified quality automobile manufacturing. Consumers bought Toyotas not for the styling or prestige but for their unparalleled reliability. But by 2002, Toyota management decided it was not enough to build the highest-quality and most-profitable cars—it wanted to be the biggest car company in the world. And the company succeeded. It built factories rapidly and added enough capacity to produce three million additional automobiles in just six years. But productivity came at a high price: Suppliers could not sustain the quality for which Toyota was known, and the new factories did not have the time to build a kaizen culture. The result was over nine million recalls and some well-deserved bad publicity. Here is an internal memo written before the crisis became public:

> ***"We make so many cars in so many different places with so many people. Our greatest fear is that as we keep growing, our ability to maintain the discipline of kaizen will be lost."***
>
> —Teruo Suzuki General Manager, Human Resources

In time, Toyota recognized that abandoning kaizen drove the company away from a commitment to its core principles. Since the crisis, Toyota has slowed down production, given local managers in the U.S. more responsibility for quality control, and trained new workers in the kaizen culture. Toyota has returned to focusing on quality, not quantity, as its mission, with an emphasis on correcting defects in production while they are small and easily fixed. And Toyota's reputation for quality has been restored. The company's story is an excellent illustration of the ways in which kaizen builds habits that can last a lifetime and helps avoid the painful consequences of steps that may, in retrospect, have been too big for the individual or the work group to swallow.

Kaizen: The Spiritual Side

Before inviting you to begin your journey through this book and to experience the power and possibilities of kaizen, I would like to cover one more topic: spirituality. By this I do not mean necessarily a faith in God, but a sense of purpose and a feeling of fulfillment. Kaizen is as much a philosophy or belief system as it is a strategy for success in changing or enhancing some behavior. There are two elements of the spirit, or purpose, in which kaizen plays an essential role: service and gratitude. As John Wooden, the legendary UCLA basketball coach, expressed it, "You can't live a perfect day without doing something for someone who will never be able to repay you." Other luminaries have spoken of the essential element of service:

"Life's most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?"

—Martin Luther King Jr.

"Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier."

—Mother Teresa

Service is even an essential aspect of the business applications of kaizen. Each employee in a kaizen culture is asked to look each day for ways to improve the process or product: lowering cost, increasing quality, and always—I repeat, *always*—in the service of the customer. Very often, successful corporations such as Amazon, Starbucks, and Southwest Airlines define themselves as primarily devoted to service. As Colleen Barrett, a former Southwest CEO, says, "We're in the customer-service business; we happen to offer air transportation. We consider our employees to be our number one customer, our passengers our second, and our shareholders our third." Kaizen demands that every small change be to the benefit of the customer.

What John Wooden, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King Jr. were speaking to was the daily practice of looking for small ways to touch people's lives. Recall the last day or two of your life—all the people you interacted with, those under your roof, those in other cars on the highway, people who cared for you in restaurants or grocery stores, people in the hallways of buildings you walked through, and people on the phone. If you were 100 percent sure that you would have changed their day—maybe improved their lives—would you have done one or two things differently? Almost all of us would say yes. Can I persuade you that if you let a driver into your lane, or thank a sales clerk, or smile at someone in a hallway, you can change his or her life? Of course not—but if you don't go through the day with the assumption that small moments and small gestures can touch people's lives, what is the alternative belief?

We all have relationships we place in the innovative category: People who loom large enough in our lives that on our best days, they get the kindness and consideration they deserve. How can you extend that kindness in ways that would enrich our hearts and our communities?

Gratitude is often considered an element of spirit or purpose. But what are we expected to be grateful for? Innovation calls for financial gains, promotions, and possessions to stoke the fires of gratitude. But

kaizen invites us to be grateful for health, for our next breath, for the moments with a friend or colleague. When famous songwriter Warren Zevon was suffering from terminal cancer, David Letterman asked him what wisdom he gleaned from his illness. Zevon's answer was pure kaizen: "Enjoy every sandwich."

Some quotes on service and gratitude to begin your exploration of kaizen:

"I long to accomplish a great and noble task but it is my chief duty to accomplish small tasks as if they were great and noble."

—Helen Keller

"We have to learn to live happily in the present moment, to touch the peace and joy that are available now."

—Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist Zen master

"Strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value."

—Albert Einstein

"I would rather have it said, 'He lived usefully' than 'He died rich.' "

—Benjamin Franklin

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One Small Step

Japanese corporations have long used the gentle technique of kaizen to achieve their business goals and maintain excellence. Now this elegant strategy can help *you* realize your personal dreams.

Most of psychology and medicine is devoted to studying why people get sick or don't function well in life. But throughout my career as a psychologist, I've always been intrigued by the *opposite* of failure. When a dieter loses ten pounds and keeps it off, I want to know why. If a person finds love after years of unsatisfying relationships, I'm curious about the strategies that made this happiness possible. When a corporation stays on top of its game for fifty years, I want to understand the human decisions behind the success. And so there have been two questions that have occupied my professional life:

How do people succeed?
How do successful people stay successful?

Of course, there are as many ways to achieve success as there are successful people. But over the course of thirty-two years in practice, I've had the satisfaction of watching countless clients use an unusual method to create lasting change. They've applied the same simple principles to improve their lives in just about every way. They've lost weight (and kept it off); begun an exercise program (and stuck with it); kicked addictions (for good); created strong relationships (the kind that last); become organized (without sliding when things get hectic); and improved their careers (and continued to do so, long after their performance reports are filed).

If you'd like to make a change—one that sticks—I hope you'll read on. This method is something of an open secret, one that has circulated among Japanese businesses for decades and is used daily by private citizens across the globe. It is a natural, graceful technique for achieving goals and maintaining excellence. It can slip into even the tightest of schedules. And in this book, I'll share this strategy with you.

But first, I want you to meet Julie.

JULIE SAT IN THE EXAMINING ROOM, her eyes cast downward. She had come to UCLA's medical center for help with high blood pressure and fatigue, but the family-practice resident and I could see that much more was going on. Julie was a divorced mother of two, by her own admission a little depressed and more than a little overwhelmed. Her support system was shaky at best, and she was just barely holding on to her job.

The young doctor and I were concerned about Julie's long-term health. Her weight (she was carrying more than thirty extra pounds) and soaring stress level put her at increased risk for diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and deeper depression. It was clear that if Julie did not make some changes, she was headed down a spiral of disease and despair.

We knew a cheap, proven way to help Julie, and it wasn't a bottle of pills or years in psychotherapy. If you read the papers or watch the news, you can probably guess what I'm talking about: exercise. Regular

physical activity could improve nearly all of Julie's health problems, give her more stamina to sustain her through her grueling days, and boost her spirits.

Once, I might have offered this free and effective treatment with all the zeal of a new convert. *Go jogging! Ride a bike! Rent an aerobics video!* I might have said. *Give up your lunch break, wake up an hour earlier if you have to, but just get up and make that commitment to your health five times a week!* But when I looked at the dark circles under Julie's eyes, my heart sank. We'd probably told hundreds of patients to exercise, but very few of them made it a regular habit. They found it too time-consuming, too sweaty, too much effort. I believe that most of them were also afraid of breaking out of their comfortable ruts, although not all of the patients were aware of this fear. And here sat Julie, who worked almost constantly just to keep her kids housed and clean and fed. Her only solace was relaxing for a half hour or so on the couch most evenings. I could predict what would happen: The doctor would tell her to exercise, Julie would feel both misunderstood ("How am I going to find time to work out? You don't understand me at all!") and guilty. The resident physician would feel frustrated to see her advice ignored one more time—and possibly start to become cynical, as so many hopeful young doctors eventually do. What could I do to break this sad cycle?

Charging Uphill: Innovation

When people want to change, they usually turn first to the strategy of *innovation.* Although you may usually think of innovation as a type of creative breakthrough, I'm using the term here as it's defined by business schools, where the vocabulary of success and change is highly specific. According to this definition, innovation is a drastic process of change. Ideally, it occurs in a very short period of time, yielding a dramatic turnaround. Innovation is fast and big and flashy; it reaches for the largest result in the smallest amount of time.

Although the term may be new to you, the idea behind it is probably quite familiar. In the corporate world, examples of innovation include highly painful strategies such as mass layoffs to strengthen the bottom line as well as more positive approaches such as major investments in expensive new technologies. The radical changes of innovation are also a favorite strategy for personal change. If Julie had wanted to apply innovation to her weight problem, she might have embarked on the kind of rigorous exercise program I mentioned. This program would require serious life changes. She would need to get her heart rate up for at least half an hour, five days a week. She'd have to find the discipline to rearrange her schedule, cope with some serious initial muscle soreness, perhaps budget for some new clothes or shoes, and—most of all—she'd have to commit to her new program through those tough first weeks or months.

Other examples of innovation for personal change include:

- diets that ask you to cut out all your favorite foods at once
- quitting an addiction "cold turkey"
- austerity plans for getting out of personal debt
- jumping into risky social situations to conquer shyness

Sometimes innovation produces amazing results. Most of us can recall making a successful change through the kind of dramatic means listed above, with immediate effects. With much-deserved pride, you may be able to describe examples of innovation in your personal life, such as giving up smoking one day and never, ever returning to it.

I applaud innovation as a way to make changes . . . when it works. Turning our lives around on a dime can be a source of confidence and self-respect. But I have observed that many people are crippled by the belief that innovation is the *only* way to change. We ignore a problem or challenge for as long as possible, and then, when we are forced by circumstances or duress, we attempt to make a large leap toward improvement. If the big leap lands us on greener territory, we congratulate ourselves, and rightly so. But if we slip and fall, the resulting pain and embarrassment can be devastating.

Even if you are a highly disciplined and successful person, I'll bet you can remember many times that you have tried innovation and failed, whether it was a crash diet that crashed or an expensive relationship "cure" (perhaps a spontaneous trip to Paris) that left your romance in the same ill health. That's the problem with innovation. Too often, you meet with success in the short term, only to find yourself falling back into your old ways when your initial burst of enthusiasm fades away. Radical change is like charging

up a steep hill—you may run out of wind before you reach the crest, or the thought of all the work ahead makes you give up no sooner than you've begun.

There is an alternative to innovation. It is another path altogether, one that winds so gently up the hill that you hardly notice the climb. It is pleasant to negotiate and soft to tread. And all it requires is that you place one foot in front of the other.

Welcome to Kaizen

This alternative strategy for change is called *kaizen*. Kaizen is captured in this familiar but powerful saying:

> ***"A journey of a thousand miles must begin with the first step."***
>
> —Lao Tzu

Despite the foreign name, kaizen—small steps for continual improvement—was first applied systematically in Depression-era America. When France fell to Nazi Germany in 1940, American leaders realized how urgently the Allies needed shipments of our military equipment. They also were forced to acknowledge that American soldiers might soon be sent abroad as well, requiring their own tanks, weapons, and supplies. American manufacturers would need to step up the quality and quantity of their equipment production, and quickly. This challenge was intensified by the loss of many qualified factory supervisors to the American armed forces, which were busy making their preparations for war.

To overcome these tight time and personnel constraints, the U.S. government created management courses called Training Within Industries (TWI) and offered them to corporations throughout America. One of these courses held the seeds of what would, in another time and place, become known as kaizen. Instead of encouraging radical, more innovative change to produce the demanded results, the TWI course exhorted managers toward what it called "continuous improvement." The course manual urged supervisors to "look for hundreds of small things you can improve. Don't try to plan a whole new department layout—or go after a big installation of new equipment. There isn't time for these major items. Look for improvements on existing jobs with your present equipment."

One of the most vocal advocates of continuous improvement at this time was Dr. W. Edwards Deming, a statistician who worked on a quality control team that aided American manufacturers as they tried to find their wartime footing. Dr. Deming instructed managers to involve every single employee in the improvement process. The intense time pressure had transformed elitism and snobbery into unaffordable luxuries. *Everyone,* from those on the lowest rungs to the men in the catbird seats, was encouraged to find little ways to increase the quality of their product and the efficiency of creating it. Suggestion boxes were positioned on factory floors so that line workers could suggest ways to improve productivity, and executives were obliged to treat each of these comments with great respect.

At first, this philosophy must have seemed shockingly inadequate under the circumstances—but, somehow, these little steps added up to a brilliant acceleration of America's manufacturing capacity. The quality of American equipment and the speed of its production were two of the major factors in the Allied victory.

> ***"When you improve a little each day, eventually big things occur. When you improve conditioning a little each day, eventually you have a big improvement in conditioning. Not tomorrow, not the next day, but eventually a big gain is made. Don't look for the big, quick improvement. Seek the small improvement one day at a time. That's the only way it happens—***

and when it happens, it lasts."

—John Wooden, one of the most successful coaches in the history of college basketball

This philosophy of small steps toward improvement was introduced to Japan after the war, when General Douglas MacArthur's occupation forces began to rebuild that devastated country. If you are familiar with Japan's corporate dominance in the late twentieth century, you may be surprised to hear that many of its postwar businesses were run poorly, with slack management practices and low employee morale. General MacArthur saw the need to improve Japanese efficiency and raise business standards. A thriving Japanese economy was in MacArthur's best interest, because a strong society could provide a bulwark against a possible threat from North Korea and keep his troops in steady supplies. He brought in the U.S. government's TWI specialists, including those who emphasized the importance of small, daily steps toward change. And at the same time that MacArthur was holding forth on small steps, the U.S. Air Force developed a class in management and supervision for the Japanese businesses near one of its local bases. The class was called the Management Training Program (MTP), and its tenets were almost identical to those developed by Dr. Deming and his colleagues at the beginning of the war. Thousands of Japanese business managers were enrolled.

The Japanese were unusually receptive to this idea. Their industrial base destroyed, they lacked the resources for sweeping reorganization. And it wasn't lost on Japanese business leaders that their country had been defeated in part by America's superior equipment and technology—so they listened closely to the Americans' lessons on manufacturing. Viewing employees as a resource for creativity and improvement and learning to be receptive to subordinates' ideas was an unfamiliar notion (as it had been for Americans), but the graduates of these programs gave it a try. These entrepreneurs and managers and executives went on to work in civilian industries, where they excitedly spread the gospel of small steps.

In the U.S., Dr. Deming's series of strategies for enhancing the manufacturing process were largely ignored once the troops were home and production was back to normal. In Japan, however, his concepts were already part of the emerging Japanese business culture. In the late 1950s, the Japanese Union of Scientists and Engineers (JUSE) invited Dr. Deming, the wartime proponent of quality control, to consult further on their country's economic efficiency and output. As you probably know, Japanese businesses—which rebuilt themselves on the bedrock of small steps—soon rocketed to unheard-of levels of productivity. Small steps were so successful that the Japanese gave them a name of their own: kaizen.

In the 1980s, kaizen began to cross back over to the U.S., mainly in highly technical business applications. I first encountered the industrial exercise of kaizen as a corporate consultant; as a student of success, I became intrigued with this philosophy and began to study it more deeply. For decades now, I've explored the application of kaizen's small steps to *personal* success. In my clinical work with individual clients and as a faculty member of the University of California at Los Angeles School of Medicine, I've had plenty of opportunity to witness people who need to change their lives—to kick a bad habit, ease their loneliness, or break out of an unsatisfying career. When I assist corporations, helping business executives grapple with tough situations is practically my job description. Over and over, I've seen people bravely attempt to implement revolutionary schemes for improvement. Some succeeded, but most did not. Often, these frustrated souls gave up, accepting life's consolation prizes rather than pursuing their real ambitions. Having encountered the industrial exercise of kaizen in my corporate work, I began to

wonder whether kaizen had a place inside the psychologist's office, as a strategy not just for simple profit, but for the expansion of behavioral, cognitive, and even spiritual potential of people like Julie.

KAIZEN VERSUS INNOVATION

Kaizen and innovation are the two major strategies people use to create change. Where innovation demands shocking and radical reform, all kaizen asks is that you take small, comfortable steps toward improvement.

Small Steps, Giant Leaps

Julie struck me as the perfect candidate for change in its smallest, least threatening form. I looked on as Julie waited to hear what the resident had to say. As I predicted, the resident talked to Julie about the importance of taking time for herself and of getting some exercise. Just as she was about to tell Julie to spend at least thirty minutes of most days on aerobically challenging exercise—a recommendation that would have likely been met with disbelief and anger—I found myself jumping in.

"How about if you just march in place in front of the television, each day, for *one minute?*"

The resident shot me an incredulous look.

But Julie brightened a little. She said, "I could give that a try."

When Julie returned for a follow-up visit, she reported that she'd indeed marched in front of the TV set for one minute each night. Granted, she wasn't going to get much healthier with just sixty seconds of low-intensity exercise. But during this second visit, I noticed that Julie's attitude had changed. Instead of coming back discouraged, as so many failed exercisers do, Julie was more animated, with less resistance in her speech and demeanor.

"What else can I do in one minute a day?" she wanted to know.

I was thrilled. A small success, yes, but much better than the all-around discouragement I'd seen so many times. We began to guide Julie slowly toward a healthier life, building up the exercise habit minute by minute. Within a few months, Julie found that her resistance to a more complete fitness program had dissolved. She was now eager to take on full aerobics workouts—which she performed regularly and enthusiastically! At the same time, I introduced little kaizen steps to other patients at the medical center, to clients in my psychology practice, and to the corporations that hired me as a consultant. And I'm talking about *really* small steps here, ones that seemed almost embarrassingly trivial at first. Instead of encouraging clients to leave unsatisfying careers, I might have them spend a few seconds each day imagining the details of a dream job. If a patient wanted to cut out caffeine, we'd start by taking one less sip each day. A frustrated manager might actually try giving *smaller,* not larger, rewards to employees to increase their motivation.

This personal application of kaizen transformed its nature. Businesses and factories tend to let small steps for improvement accumulate into a larger change. But the psychology of the individual is a little different. In fact, a surprising number of my clients intuitively perceive what it took me years of observation to see: that low-key change helps the human mind circumnavigate the fear that blocks success and creativity. Just as a student driver practices in an empty parking lot, first just sitting in the car and trying out its equipment and then driving for a few minutes at a time, my clients learn to master the smallest steps of change in a safe, nonthreatening environment.

Often, people find that their minds develop a desire for this new behavior, whether it is regular exercise (as in Julie's case), a diet, cleaning off their desks, or spending time with a loving, supportive companion instead of a destructive one. Eventually, my clients are startled to discover that they have reached their goals with no additional conscious effort on their part. How does this happen? I believe that the kaizen approach is a highly effective method of building new neural connections in the brain, an idea

I'll address in more detail in the coming chapter. As one client often said to me, "The steps were so small I couldn't fail!"

Because the vast majority of people want to improve their health, relationships, or careers, this book devotes much of its space to these topics. But the principles I outline here can apply to any project for change, whether the goal is ending a nail-biting habit or learning to say no to the empty demands that suck up all your time. As you consider your plans for change, I hope you'll want to keep in mind the original intent of the small-steps philosophy. Kaizen is an effective, enjoyable way to achieve a specific goal, but it also extends a more profound challenge: to meet life's constant demands for change by seeking out continual—but always small—improvement.

Through decades of working with people of all stripes, with unique strengths and needs, I've developed a theory about *why* kaizen works when all else fails. I outline this theory in the first chapter. The succeeding chapters are devoted to the personal application of kaizen and encompass six different strategies. These strategies include:

- asking small questions to dispel fear and inspire creativity
- thinking small thoughts to develop new skills and habits—without moving a muscle
- taking small actions that guarantee success
- solving small problems, even when you're faced with an overwhelming crisis
- bestowing small rewards to yourself or others to produce the best results
- recognizing the small but crucial moments that everyone else ignores

No matter whether your interest in kaizen is philosophical or practical, whether you want to change the world or drop a few pounds, this book is now yours to be used in whatever manner you see fit. Certainly, you don't need to try *all* of the six strategies listed above if that doesn't appeal to you. I am always delighted when clients take up one or two or three of these techniques, cooking up a highly individualized menu for change. In the chapters to come, I'll demonstrate how people combine kaizen techniques for personalized results, and I invite you to think of these strategies in the same spirit, using those that speak most clearly to you. In each chapter, you'll find highlighted instructions for a specific kaizen technique, along with suggestions for adapting that technique to your own needs.

I encourage you to read these pages and try a small step or two, even if that means changing nothing more than the way you think about your colleagues for a few seconds a day or doing something as small and seemingly ridiculous as flossing one tooth each night. Just remember: While the steps may be small, what we're reaching for is not. To commit your life to honoring and maintaining your physical health; to the passion, the risk, and the excellence of a demanding career; to the pursuit of a rewarding relationship with another human being; or the continual upward revision of your personal standards, is to strive for powerful goals, often elusive and at times frightening. But for now, all you need to do is take one small step.

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CHAPTER ONE

Why Kaizen Works

All changes, even positive ones, are scary. Attempts to reach goals through radical or revolutionary means often fail because they heighten fear. But the small steps of kaizen disarm the brain's fear response, stimulating rational thought and creative play.

Change is frightening. This human fact is unavoidable whether the change is seemingly insignificant (visiting a new nightclub) or life-altering (having a baby). This fear of change is rooted in the brain's physiology, and when fear takes hold, it can prevent creativity, change, and success.

From an evolutionary standpoint, the brain is one of the most unusual organs in the human body. Our other organs—the heart, liver, intestines, and so on—developed so well that they have remained consistent through eons of human evolution. But for the last four or five hundred million years, the brain has continued to develop and change. Today, we actually have *three* separate brains that came along at intervals of about one or two hundred million years. One of our challenges as humans is to develop harmony among these different brains so as to avoid physical and emotional illness.

At the bottom of the brain is the brain stem. It's about five hundred million years old and is called the reptilian brain (and in fact it does look like an alligator's whole brain). The reptilian brain wakes you up in the morning, sends you off to sleep at night, and reminds your heart to beat.

Sitting on top of the brain stem is the midbrain, also known as the mammalian brain. Roughly three hundred million years old, this is the brain possessed in one form or another by all mammals. The midbrain regulates the body's internal temperature, houses our emotions, and governs the fight-or-flight response that keeps us alive in the face of danger.

The third part of the brain is the cortex, which began to develop about one hundred million years ago. The cortex, which wraps around the rest of the brain, is responsible for the miracle of being human. Civilization, art, science, and music all reside there. It's where our rational thoughts and creative impulses take place. When we want to make a change, or jump-start the creative process, we need access to the cortex.

This three-brain arrangement doesn't always function smoothly. Our rational brains direct us to lose weight—but then we eat a bag of chips at one sitting. Or we try to come up with a creative pitch for a new project—and our minds go blank as fresh concrete.

When you want to change but experience a block, you can often blame the midbrain for gumming up the works. The midbrain is where you'll find a structure called the amygdala (a-MIG-duh-luh). The amygdala is absolutely crucial to our survival. It controls the fight-or-flight response, an alarm mechanism that we share with all other mammals. It was designed to alert parts of the body for action in the face of immediate danger. One way it accomplishes this is to slow down or stop other functions such as rational and creative thinking that could interfere with the physical ability to run or fight.

The fight-or-flight response makes a lot of sense. If a lion is charging at you, the brain does not want you to waste time carefully thinking through the problem. Instead, the brain simply shuts down

nonessential functions, such as digestion, sexual desire, and thought processes, and sends the body directly into action. Thousands of years ago, when we roamed the jungles and forests and savannas with other mammals, this mechanism came in handy every time humans put themselves in jeopardy by straying from the safe and familiar. Since we possessed bodies that did not run very fast, that lacked the strength of the animals that wanted to prey upon it, and that did not see or smell well, this timidity was crucial. The fight-or-flight response is still vital today, for instance, if a car on the highway heads the wrong way down your lane, or if you need to escape a burning building.

The real problem with the amygdala and its fight-or-flight response today is that it sets off alarm bells *whenever* we want to make a departure from our usual, safe routines. The brain is designed so that any new challenge or opportunity or desire triggers *some* degree of fear. Whether the challenge is a new job or just meeting a new person, the amygdala alerts parts of the body to prepare for action—and our access to the cortex, the thinking part of the brain, is restricted, and sometimes shut down.

Remember my client Julie, the one who marched in front of the television set for one minute every night? Clearly Julie was afraid for her health—that's why she came to the doctor in the first place—but her enormous responsibilities led to other, less obvious fears that competed for her attention. She was afraid of losing her job, afraid for her children's safety, afraid she wasn't a good mother, and—as she later confessed—afraid of disappointing her physician if she didn't follow doctor's orders. In fact, when a previous doctor had urged her to exercise strenuously several times a week, her fear of letting him down shared a crowded stage with all her other worries—leaving her so overwhelmed that she failed to exercise at all. Even worse, ashamed to have disobeyed the doctor's instructions, she stopped seeking medical care altogether. Instead, she relied on television and junk food for comfort.

You may have experienced this phenomenon in the form of test anxiety. The more important you believe the test to be, the more you have riding on the outcome, the more fear you feel. And then you find it difficult to concentrate. An answer you might have had down cold the night before seems to have withdrawn itself from your memory bank.

large goal → fear → access to cortex restricted → failure

small goal → fear bypassed → cortex engaged → success

Some lucky people are able to get around this problem by turning their fear into another emotion: excitement. The bigger the challenge, the more excited and productive and thrilled they become. You probably know a few people like this. They come to life when they sense a challenge. But for the rest of us, big goals trigger big fear. Just as it happened with our ancestors on the savanna, the brain restricts the cortex in order to get us moving away from the lion—but now the lion is a piece of paper called a test or a goal of losing weight, finding a mate, or creating a sales result. Creativity and purposeful action are suppressed exactly when we need them the most!

The little steps of kaizen are a kind of stealth solution to this quality of the brain. Instead of spending years in counseling to understand why you're afraid of looking great or achieving your professional goals, you can use kaizen to go around or under these fears. Small, easily achievable goals—such as picking up and storing just one paper clip on a chronically messy desk—let you tiptoe right past the amygdala, keeping it asleep and unable to set off alarm bells. As your small steps continue and your cortex starts

working, the brain begins to create “software” for your desired change, actually laying down new nerve pathways and building new habits. Soon, your resistance to change begins to weaken. Where once you might have been daunted by change, your new mental software will have you moving toward your ultimate goal at a pace that may well exceed your expectations. That’s exactly what happened to Julie. After a few weeks of very limited exercise, she was shocked to find herself exercising even when she didn’t have to. Those first small steps laid down the neural network for *enjoying* the change.

Kaizen helps you defeat the fear of change in another way. When you are afraid, the brain is programmed either to run or attack—not always the most practical options. If you’ve always wanted to be a songwriter, for example, you will not achieve your goal if you get up from the piano keyboard out of fear or creative blockage and spend the night watching television instead. Small actions (say, writing just three notes) satisfy your brain’s need to *do something* and soothe its distress. As the alarms die down, you’ll renew access to the cortex and get some of your creative juices flowing again.

HOW SMALL STEPS BECOME GIANT LEAPS

Your brain is programmed to resist change. But, by taking small steps, you effectively rewire your nervous system so that it does the following:

- “unsticks” you from a creative block
- bypasses the fight-or-flight response
- creates new connections between neurons so that the brain enthusiastically takes over the process of change and you progress rapidly toward your goal

Stress . . . or Fear?

While the modern medical name for the feeling produced by a new challenge or large goal is *stress,* for countless generations it went by the old, familiar name of *fear.* Even now, I've found that the most successful people are the ones who gaze at fear unblinkingly. Instead of relying on terms like *anxiety, stress,* or *nervousness,* they speak openly of being frightened by their responsibilities and challenges. Here's Jack Welch, the past CEO of General Electric: "Everyone who is running something goes home at night and wrestles with the same fear: Am I going to be the one who blows this place up?" Chuck Jones, the creator of Pepé Le Pew and Wile E. Coyote, emphasized that "fear is an important factor in any creative work." And Sally Ride, the astronaut, is unafraid to talk plainly of fear: "All adventures, especially into new territory, are scary."

I was puzzled why so many remarkable people preferred the word *fear* to *stress* or *anxiety.* The answer came to me one day while I was working at the UCLA School of Medicine, observing physicians in the course of their training. I was again following one of our family-practice resident physicians through the course of her day in the health center, seeing children and adults for the wide variety of maladies that bring people to a primary-care physician. I noticed that when adults came to see a physician and talked about their emotional pain, they chose words such as *stress, anxiety, depression, nervous,* and *tense.* But when I observed children talking about their feelings, they talked about being *scared, sad,* or *afraid.*

It's my conclusion that the reason for the difference in word choice had less to do with the symptoms and more to do with expectations. The children assumed their feelings were normal. Children know they live in a world they cannot control. They have no say in whether their parents are in a good mood or bad, or whether their teachers are nice or mean. They understand that fear is part of their lives.

Adults, I believe, assume that if they are living correctly, they can control the events around them. When fear does appear, it seems all wrong—so adults prefer to call it by the names for psychiatric disease. Fear becomes a disorder, something to put in a box with a tidy label of "stress" or "anxiety."

This approach to fear is unproductive. If your expectation is that a well-run life should always be orderly, you are setting yourself up for panic and defeat. If you assume that a new job or relationship or health goal is supposed to be easy, you will feel angry and confused when fear arises—and you'll do anything to make it disappear. We may not even be aware of the exaggerated, desperate measures we take to get rid of fear. This common but counterproductive phenomenon is captured in a familiar joke: A drunk is on his hands and knees looking for his keys under a streetlight. A policeman approaches him and asks, "What are you doing?" The drunk replies in a slurred voice, "I'm looking for my keys." The policeman further inquires, "Where did you drop them?" The drunk says, "Over there," pointing to the end of the city block. The policeman scratches his head and says, "If you dropped the keys over there, why are you looking for them over here?" And the drunk replies, "Because the light is better over here."

When life gets scary and difficult, we tend to look for solutions in places where it is easy or at least familiar to do so, and not in the dark, uncomfortable places where real solutions might lie. So the single person who fears intimacy might change jobs or cities, working to improve an already-good career rather

than venture into the deep end of the pool close to home, where intimacy might be experienced. People who are not taking care of their health or who are ignoring an unsatisfying marriage might purchase a new home or a second home and focus on that venture instead. People with low self-esteem might leap into cosmetic surgery or a crash diet and exercise regimen, focusing on caloric intake and food groups rather than facing themselves and their self-critical natures.

"Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear."

—Mark Twain

But if you *expect* fear, you can approach it in a compassionate manner. It helps to remember that when we want to change, rational thoughts don't always guide actions, and fear can well up in the most ordinary of places. Let's say that you've been late to work during the last couple of weeks. One morning, you wake up and make a very rational resolution: Today will be the day you finally arrive at the office on time. But it's possible that fears you're not even aware of—perhaps of confronting a dominating co-worker—will stall your brain in its tracks, leading you to make an extra phone call or do one more load of laundry before leaving the house. In effect, fear can cause you unconsciously to sabotage your best intentions.

Don't let these common roadblocks to change make you feel so guilty or frustrated that you give up your attempts to improve. Conflict is a condition of being human; if people could control their actions easily, we'd be a much gentler species, and the front page of the morning newspaper would look a lot different. Instead, use times of difficulty to remember that fear is the body's gift, alerting us to a challenge. The more we care about something, the more we dream, the more fear shows up. Thinking about fear in this way can help us feel less distraught. During the rough patches, understanding that fear is normal, and a natural sign of ambition, makes us more likely to hold on to hope and optimism—qualities that increase our willingness to take the kinds of small steps that slip right past the fear. Instead of raging at ourselves for being late yet again, or sadly concluding that we are simply incapable of arriving at work on time, we can gently acknowledge the fear and its effects on us. Then we can quietly and gingerly take a small step such as simply *imagining* a pleasant conversation with the difficult co-worker. Eventually, small steps like these will build fresh habits in our brains. In the coming chapters, I'll show you the small steps of kaizen in detail. With these, fear may be faced, and even transformed.

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CHAPTER TWO

Ask Small Questions

Small questions create a mental environment that welcomes unabashed creativity and playfulness. When you ask small questions of others, you channel that creative force toward team goals. By asking small questions of yourself, you lay the groundwork for a personalized program for change.

One of the most powerful ways to "program" your brain is the kaizen technique of asking small questions. I first put this idea into practice when I was hired by a manufacturing firm to help its managers improve some groups that were performing poorly. I watched as the supervisor of one of these groups—let's call him Patrick—ran a meeting. Patrick paced frenetically back and forth in front of his employees, asking in a loud, rapid-fire voice, "What is each of you going to do to make our company the best in the industry?" This questioning had become a frequent ritual for Patrick at both formal meetings and more casual gatherings.

Patrick hoped to instill a sense of responsibility and pride in his staff. He thought he was empowering them to create bold new products and services as well as major cost savings. Instead, the employees froze up. They were visibly uncomfortable, gazing down at the floor and fidgeting in their chairs. I noticed that one man's hands actually began to tremble; whether out of fright or anger I didn't know. Later, I heard employees complaining plaintively among themselves: *What does Patrick expect of us? Why do we have to come up with new ideas? That's his job! We have enough to do as it is!* The few suggestions Patrick did receive—hire more employees to help us get our jobs done, buy new equipment to replace our outdated machines—called for expensive, impractical actions and were actually complaints in disguise. In the three months following Patrick's first urgent call for improvement, the number of sick days taken by employees increased by 23 percent.

I told Patrick that I agreed with his basic strategy of going to his employees as a source of fresh ideas. In Japanese business circles, a basic tenet for using kaizen is to encourage each employee to stay vigilant on behalf of the corporation, an approach that yields profitable cost-cutting ideas and a highly engaged, productive workforce. However, the kaizen method works not by manic exhortation to revolutionize the company, but by requests that are much simpler and restricted in scope. I suggested to Patrick that he soften his tone and alter his phrasing. In his next meeting, Patrick used a calmer voice and asked each employee: "Can you think of a very small step you might take to improve our process or product?" To his surprise, faces around the room tilted toward him; as his employees began to mull over this slightly different question, they began to sit up straighter and contribute to the discussion.

Both the quality and quantity of responses improved dramatically. One employee spoke up right away. He'd noticed that scrap metal left over from jobs in the machine shop was discarded at the end of the day and wondered if the company might find a buyer for it instead. (The company did indeed start to sell the scrap metal.) Another man realized that most of the mistakes involving machine tools were made by new employees within six months of their hire date. He volunteered to spend two hours training each new employee in an attempt to save time and money. (The training accomplished both.) A third suggestion was

to have employees spend the first five minutes of the monthly staff meeting publicly thanking those who'd been extremely helpful to them. This idea was executed immediately and was so popular that it spread to the shop floor, where employees began to compliment each other on the spot instead of waiting for the meeting. Soon enough, both morale and efficiency increased. Employees not only had the satisfaction of implementing their own suggestions and improving their daily routines, but they also felt the universal pleasure of being engaged and active at work. And the number of sick days went back down to its normal level.

What had happened?

"What shapes our lives are the questions we ask, refuse to ask, or never think to ask."

—Sam Keen

Your Brain Loves Questions

Try this experiment. Tomorrow at work or wherever you spend your time, ask one of your friends the color of the car parked next to hers. Your friend is likely to give you a funny look and then admit she has no idea. Repeat the question the next day and the day after that. By the fourth or fifth day, your friend will have no choice: As she pulls into the parking lot the next morning, her brain will remind her that that silly person (you) is going to ask that silly question, and she'll be forced to store the answer in her short-term memory bank. For this effect, you owe partial thanks to the hippocampus, which is located in the mammalian part of your brain and decides what information to store and what to retrieve. The hippocampus's main criterion for storage is repetition, so asking that question over and over gives the brain no choice but to pay attention and begin to create answers.

Questions ("What is the color of the car parked next to yours?") turn out to be more productive and useful for shaping ideas and solutions than commands ("Tell me the color of the car parked next to yours."). Results from my informal laboratory of patients and corporate clients suggest that questions are simply better at engaging the brain. Your brain wants to play! A question wakes up your brain and delights it. Your brain loves to take in questions, even ludicrous or odd ones, and turn them over. Next time you're on an airplane, take a quick survey of your fellow passengers' activities. I'll bet you find that many people are working on crossword or Sudoku puzzles. Crossword puzzles, which are essentially a series of questions, are beguiling to a brain that fears boredom during the long flight ahead. Or notice a child's inattentiveness to didactic statements ("This is a doggie.") compared to his widened eyes when you ask a question, even if you're the one supplying the answer ("What's this? This is a doggie."). Parents intuitively know to ask questions, then answer them, then ask again and see if the child can recall. They understand that the brain loves questions.

Again and again, I've seen dramatically different effects between asking questions and issuing commands—and that's not just during business meetings, but in personal and even medical situations as well. For example, we're all so used to receiving instructions for improving our health, we could recite them in our sleep: Fill half your plate with fruits and vegetables, reduce your intake of saturated and trans fats, exercise regularly, drink enough water, and so on. Yet these repeated commands obviously fail to engage most of us, as the national rates of obesity, heart disease, and diabetes testify.

I've found that patients in the family-practice clinic at UCLA have much better success in meeting health guidelines when I suggest they pose kaizen questions to themselves:

- If health were my first priority, what would I be doing differently today?
- What is one way I can remind myself to drink more water?
- How could I incorporate a few more minutes of exercise into my daily routine?

After they let their brains chew on these questions for a few days, patients who formerly insisted they had no time for their health start to come up with creative ways to incorporate good habits into their routines. One patient began keeping a bottle of water in her car; even if that bottle was empty, she reasoned, it would remind her to *think* about drinking more water—and she did. Another woman, whose

travel schedule made it difficult for her to follow a weight-loss program, decided she'd continue to order her regular entrées at restaurants, but ask the waiter to put half the meal into a doggie bag before serving it to her. That way, she never even saw the half she was taking back to her hotel room. A third woman, who felt that a more positive attitude would be healthful, came up with the idea of playing Handel's exuberant "Hallelujah Chorus" as she brushed her teeth in the morning.

Each of these women reported that she was making better food choices and slowing down to enjoy meals, simply because the right—and repeated—question made her more aware of her health. Delighted by the creative answers that had flowed in, and motivated to follow their own inspiration rather than a doctor's edict, they soon were enthusiastically searching for additional measures they could take to improve their well-being. Admittedly, they were not yet exercising for the recommended amount of time or eating according to every single nutrition guideline, but these women were well down the road to success. (In the chapter "Take Small Actions," I'll discuss how very small actions—even ones as small as leaving an empty bottle of water in your car—can help achieve impossible-seeming goals. For now, it's enough to understand the usefulness of small questions.)

Tiptoe Past Fear

Your brain loves questions and won't reject them . . . unless the question is so big it triggers fear. Questions such as "How am I going to get thin (or rich, or married) by the end of the year?" or "What new product will bring in a million more dollars for the company?" are awfully big and frightening. Like Patrick's questions to his staff, these create fear in anyone on their receiving end—even when we're asking the question of ourselves. Instead of responding with playfulness, our brain, sensing the fear, suppresses creativity and shuts down access to the cortex (the thinking part of the brain) when we need it most. One of the brain's strengths—the ability to go into a self-protective lockdown in times of danger—here becomes a crippling liability.

By asking small, gentle questions, we keep the fight-or-flight response in the "off" position. Kaizen questions such as "What's the smallest step I can take to be more efficient?" or "What can I do in five minutes a day to reduce my credit-card debt?" or "How could I find one source of information about adult education classes in my city?" allow us to bypass our fears. They allow the brain to focus on problem-solving and, eventually, action. Ask a question often enough, and you'll find your brain storing the questions, turning them over, and eventually generating some interesting and useful responses.

Although the mechanics of creativity—how the brain goes about producing a new thought—remains one of the vast unexplored frontiers of science, I've had decades of experience helping people move away from constriction and conformity and toward creativity. I believe that the mere act of posing the same question on a regular basis and waiting patiently for an answer mobilizes the cortex. A question is not demanding, not scary. It's fun. So when you ask small questions, your amygdala (where the fight-or-flight response occurs) will remain asleep, and the cortex, always hungry for a good time, will wake up and take notice. It will process and absorb the question and, in its own magical way, create answers when it is ready . . . which may be in that moment we are in the shower, driving, or washing the dishes. Albert Einstein once asked, "Why is it I get my best ideas in the morning while I am shaving?" I wonder if he'd asked himself small questions—well, as small as questions about the nature of the universe can get—in the days or weeks or months before the best ideas came to him.

SHHH . . . DON'T WAKE THE AMYGDALA!

Make your questions small, and you reduce the chances of waking the amygdala and arousing debilitating fear. When fear is quiet, the brain can take in the questions and then pop out answers on its own timetable.

Small Questions and Creativity

If you've ever tackled a big creative project such as writing a speech, you know how daunting the task is. You stock your printer with fresh paper, pour a steaming cup of coffee, call up your word processing program, and ask yourself: *What kind of opening would leave my audience spellbound?* or *How can I persuade one hundred dubious employees to accept the new plan I'm presenting?* And then you stare at the blank screen. You fidget. Your mouth goes dry. Your insides begin to buzz.

Even if you're not aware of it, your fight-or-flight response is kicking in; that feeling you might call "writer's block" is actually fear. The question you've asked yourself is too large and frightening. You've awakened your amygdala, and your cortex has simply shut down.

Michael Ondaatje, author of *The English Patient*, uses small questions when he sits down to write his novels. "I don't have any grand themes in my head," he says (a statement you'll hear echoed by other great writers). Nor does he start with an impossibly large question, such as "What kind of character would be fascinating to readers?" Instead, he takes a few incidents—"like [a] plane crash or the idea of a patient and a nurse at night talking"—and asks himself a few very small questions, such as "Who is the man in the plane? Why is he there? Why does he crash? What year is this?" Of the answers to small questions, he says, "Those little fragments, fragments of mosaics, they add up and you start finding out the past of these characters and trying to invent a past for these characters." The answers to his small questions eventually lead him to remarkably round, realistic characters and prize-winning novels.

Even if you're not an aspiring novelist, small questions can help calm the fears that squelch creativity in other realms of life. Consider how the microwave was invented, for example. Perry Spencer didn't sit around the house, drumming his fingers and pounding his forehead, thinking, "How, how, *how* can I invent a device that will revolutionize kitchens around the world?" Spencer, an engineer at Raytheon, was at work one day when he left a candy bar too close to some radar equipment. The snack melted, and he asked himself, "Why would radar have this effect on food?" This small question led to answers that led to other small questions whose answers eventually changed how you and I make dinner.

Kaizen Tip

You want to do something creative: write a story or a song, paint a picture, dream up your perfect career, or come up with a zinger of a solution to an office problem. But you have no idea where to start. Your mind keeps coming up empty.

During times like these, kaizen can help you summon your powers of inspiration. Although you can't force your brain to cough up creative ideas on demand, you *can* program it to launch the imaginative process simply by asking yourself a small question. Here are some of the most popular small questions my clients use for creativity. Feel free to come up with your own. Whatever question you use, your challenge is to ask it with a gentle and patient spirit. When you use a harsh or urgent tone with yourself, fear will clog the creative process.

- What's one thing I wish to contribute to the world with my book, poem, song, or painting?
- Whom could I ask for help or inspiration?
- What is special about my creative process/talents/business team?
- What type of work would excite and fulfill me?

Remember: If you repeat the question over the course of several days or weeks—or for however long it takes—the hippocampus (the part of the brain that stores information) will have no choice but to address it. And in its own way, on its own timetable, the brain will begin giving you answers.

Small Questions to Defuse Complicated Fears

One example of using small questions comes from a woman I'll call Grace. She was a highly competent, intelligent woman who ran her own business, but she was frustrated that she couldn't find and sustain a satisfying romantic relationship.

As I listened to Grace, I wondered if fear might be an obstacle for this otherwise confident woman. Fear, as we've seen, is frequently the reason people don't get what they want. Fears tend to sort themselves into two major categories: the fear of not being worthy (*I don't deserve it*) and the fear of losing control (*What if I like him and he leaves me?*). When I asked Grace to tell me about the men she'd dated before, she complained that she sometimes had one or two dates with men who seemed interested in a long-term relationship, but there was always some obstacle: They had a child from a previous marriage; their job wasn't equal to hers in station; they didn't like to dance. She tended to invest much more of her time in men who were rich, powerful, exciting—and remote; they showed no interest in personal communication or the kind of lifelong relationship Grace said she wanted. Why did Grace reject men with relatively small "flaws" in favor of those who were obviously not marriageable?

I used one of my favorite exercises to confirm that, in Grace's case, fear was indeed at play. I asked Grace to imagine that a time machine sat just outside the door to my office that could transport her into one of her parents' bodies. I asked her to choose whether to live as her mother or her father, sharing that parent's fate. Grace's response was a classic sign of trouble. "I don't want to be either my mother or my father," she said without hesitation. "Can't I have a third choice?" As we talked, it became clear that her mother—Grace's confidante and a well-loved parent—underwent a transformation when her husband was home. In young Grace's eyes, her mother shrank almost visibly in her husband's presence, becoming frightened and docile. Grace remembered promising herself that she'd never let anyone dominate her the way her father lorded over her mother. And the only way she'd figured out to achieve this goal was to date remote, wealthy men on whom she couldn't possibly become dependent.

Until now, however, Grace had not made this connection between what her rational brain desired (a loving, committed relationship) and the powerful contract she'd made with herself as a child (never to suffer the loss of control that love and commitment appeared to require). She began to see that her problem was more complicated than she'd previously thought and that she was more fearful than she'd been willing to admit. We agreed that Grace could benefit from further therapy to discuss her childhood, but more than anything Grace wanted a romantic partner with whom to share these very personal issues. To make this happen, I explained, we would have to take small steps toward helping Grace master her fears. Big steps would be too scary and could backfire. As a businesswoman, Grace was intrigued by the idea of improving by small increments, and she agreed to follow my suggestions, even if they sounded ridiculously trivial.

I asked Grace to describe her perfect job and what she'd like to be doing with her career in three years. She answered readily with a complete description of her goals and dreams and methods for attaining them. Then I asked her to describe an ideal man and how a perfect day with him might unfold. She couldn't do it! Her fears of letting go and allowing herself to be vulnerable in her romantic life were so

overwhelming that she couldn't even *imagine* a happy day with a man who truly loved her.

And so we began by having Grace ask herself small, nonthreatening questions that would help her cultivate an appetite for a good man—while avoiding her powerful fear response. At first, she was to spend two minutes a day asking herself: *What would my ideal mate be like?* This was difficult for Grace at first—much to her surprise—and she had to practice quite a bit to generate any answers at all. As the question took root in her imagination, however, she grew more confident and more able to produce honest answers. I then asked her to call my voice mail once a day with an answer to another question: What small, caring act would you like to receive from an ideal partner right now?

This is an easy question to answer for adults who grew up in a family with parents who provided them with daily examples of marital kindness and respect, but it was challenging for Grace. I wanted to give Grace the power of daydreaming about men so that she could develop healthy wants. Again, she continued to ask herself the question until her brain started working overtime on the answers. She discovered that, among other things, she wanted someone who thought she was pretty and told her so, who would enjoy coming home with her for Christmas, and who drank only in moderation, if at all. As her brain adjusted to the game, the answers became more refined. She could identify what kind of praise she wanted—for her looks or for her accomplishments—and when she wanted it. She became aware of when she wanted this ideal man to listen and when she wanted to be distracted from her current worries.

As she began to imagine better relationships and explore her desires, however, she also formed specific intentions for meeting her own needs. She and I agreed that she could start taking small steps that would increase her chances of meeting a man. Instead of eating alone in her office, she would take her brown-bag lunch to the food court at the basement of the high-rise where she worked. She wasn't going to flirt or even try to sit near an attractive man; she was just going to put herself "in harm's way." At the same time, I asked her to consider this question: *If I were 100 percent certain that my prince was coming in a month, what would I be doing differently today?* Grace had always maintained high standards of physical health, but now she began to dress with extra care and follow an even more nutritious diet. Essentially, she was making herself ready for her ideal man. Another question helped her mobilize her interest and leave the safety of her office and apartment: Assuming that your ideal man shares your interests, where would you like to meet him? Grace decided she might like to meet him at the gym (because that would reflect an interest in health), at a business conference (because she wanted to date a man who shared her ambitions), or a church (because she wanted someone who tended to his spiritual needs).

Within six months of starting counseling, Grace met a wonderful man at church. He gave her compliments, loved to talk, and was ready to commit. They've been married for five years and, judging by the Christmas cards I receive each holiday season, are doing well. Of course, life doesn't always produce endings as tidy as this one. But, again and again, I've seen small questions tilt the odds of happiness in someone's favor. In Grace's case, small questions allowed her to circumvent her fear and define what she wanted clearly enough that she could recognize happiness when it arrived.

Kaizen Tip

Some of my clients, including Grace, thrive when they are “assigned” to leave answers to their small questions in my voice mail. But not everyone has a therapist (and not every therapist likes an overflowing voice mailbox). These people might try calling a friend or relative. If that’s too scary, another possibility is writing their answers down in a journal or leaving messages on their *own* answering machines.

Negative Questions: A Toxic Mental Brew

The power of questions to shape experience and behavior is not limited to dynamic, productive applications. Countless times, I've heard my clients direct painfully harsh questions toward themselves. You may have found yourself saying one of the following:

- Why am I such a loser?
- How could I be so stupid?
- Why does everyone else have an easier life than I do?

These questions also have the power to engage the brain, shining a merciless, white-hot light on flaws and mistakes—real ones as well as imagined or exaggerated ones. They spark intellectual energy, all right, but that energy is used to churn weakness and emphasize inadequacies.

When I hear clients—especially those who are clearly lacking in self-esteem—damaging themselves in this way, I ask them to employ another kaizen technique: to call my voice mail once a day and tell me one positive thought they've had about themselves, or one positive act they've engaged in, no matter how small. Within a month, most clients report that the problems that drove them to counseling seem less overwhelming. They also start to view therapy in a more positive light, as a journey requiring courage and stamina, not a procedure needed because they were flawed and in need of fixing.

Kaizen Tip

If you tend to berate yourself with negative questions (*Why am I so fat?*), try asking: *What is one thing I like about myself today?* Ask this question daily, writing your answer down in a journal or on a sheet of paper you keep in a specially designated place.

Small Questions for Others

Once, I trooped out to a middle school in Los Angeles with a group of medical residents who were training to become family physicians. It's a truism in family medicine that adolescents hate going to the doctor, and until this point we'd all been resigned to dealing with teens who were sullen or uncommunicative. This was especially frustrating for doctors who wanted to talk to kids about important health matters like drug use, sex, and smoking, but felt their young patients weren't focused on the discussion. *But that's teenagers for you,* we all thought, *nothing you can do about it.* Then I realized that no one had even asked these kids how to make office visits less of an ordeal.

So we went to a setting that was more familiar to them than to us—their own classrooms. We asked students what they liked and didn't like about going to the doctor. One teenager raised her hand and said that when she went to the doctor, she spent the whole visit worrying about the treatment she was going to receive there, whether a booster shot for tetanus or something equally unpleasant. She suggested that doctors perform these procedures at the beginning of the visit so that their patients could focus on the doctor's questions and advice later. When the kids around her began to nod in agreement, we decided to implement this suggestion (it's worked beautifully). The resident physicians were all a little surprised and humbled when other students said that they preferred to have their parents with them in the office. The residents had assumed that teenagers found their parents embarrassing and would see their young doctor as a cool adult alternative. In another twist that reveals the ever-contradictory nature of adolescents, another student wanted doctors to give out their phone numbers directly to the teenagers so that they could call with a personal question without going through their parents.

Each of the medical residents in the group was unquestionably committed to helping adolescents become healthy, thriving adults. But very few of them saw members of this age group outside of a medical context. Their willingness to meet with them at school and ask them small questions is reflective of an ingredient basic to kaizen: respect for others, even those whose attitudes and answers we think we already understand.

You can use kaizen questions in a similar way. I know one school principal who regularly asks her secretary to inform her whenever someone leaves her office looking disgruntled or unhappy. This highly respected principal knows that many people—students and their parents alike—can feel vulnerable when they're sent "to the office" and don't always disclose their feelings until they're on the way out. By making her secretary a part of her team, the principal can provide more sensitive follow-up for these children and adults. Many successful bosses like to ask their receptionist or assistant this small question: *Is there one small improvement that the staff/customers/clients would like me to make?* (To make sure this question is answered honestly, it's important to reward honest feedback immediately and *always* practice discretion.) I even know a lawyer who regularly assembles the janitorial staff to listen to his trial summations and offer suggestions.

Questioning others may also help when you have trouble pinpointing your own needs. One woman I know was dissatisfied with her marriage. But when I asked her what she wanted from her husband, she looked at me blankly. This woman had raised two children who were now in college, nursed her parents

through their final years, and supported her husband in his career. She had accomplished a great deal, but she had focused on what her children and her husband and her parents had wanted for so long that she had cut herself out of the loop. She was angry about the way her husband treated her, but she could hardly describe the manner in which she would *like* to be treated. So she asked her happily married friends this question: *What is one thing your husband does that makes you happy?* From their answers, she created a menu of marital options, and eventually she was able to answer the question for herself.

I've run into many people who are unhappy in their current careers but cannot think of anything else they'd like to do. Most of these people have been trained to think of a job as a way to earn money—and that's all. Their brains have never been programmed to answer the question *What kind of job could bring me pride and pleasure?* In this case, I suggest finding friends who enjoy their jobs and asking: *What is one aspect of your job that makes you happy?* The answers can stimulate thought about the sources of pleasure at work.

I HOPE YOU'LL BUILD THE KAIZEN HABIT of asking yourself small (and positive!) questions. As you begin, remember that you are programming your brain for creativity, so choose a question and ask it repeatedly, over the course of several days or weeks. Instead of freezing up your brain with tall orders and angry demands, you'll experience the productive output of a brain that is pleasantly challenged. If your goal is to come up with a creative breakthrough or a single idea for improvement, you may be done when you receive your answer. But if you are trying to achieve a difficult or frightening goal, a small question may be just one step toward change. The rest of this book will suggest many more strategies—safe and nonthreatening—for realizing your dreams.

Kaizen Technique
Practicing Small Questions

The following questions are designed to form the kaizen habit of asking yourself small questions. Some of them are specifically related to goals; others give you practice in seeking out continual improvement across the categories of your life.

As you begin, remember that you are reprogramming your brain, and that it takes time for new mental pathways to develop. So choose a question and ask it repeatedly over the course of several days or weeks. Try to pose the question to yourself regularly, perhaps every morning over coffee, every time you hop into your car, or every night before bed. Consider writing your question on a Post-it note and then sticking it onto your nightstand (or dashboard, or coffeepot).

Here are just a few ideas to get you started. Feel free to come up with your own.

- **If you are unhappy but aren't sure why, try asking yourself this: *If I were guaranteed not to fail, what would I be doing differently?* The question's whimsical quality makes it safe for the brain to answer truthfully, and it can produce some surprising answers that lend clarity to your goals. Someone who is stalled out at work may discover that she really wants to quit and study landscape architecture instead; another might be shocked to find that all she really wants is the courage to ask her boss to say "hello" in the mornings.**

- **If you are trying to reach a specific goal, ask yourself every day: *What is one small step I could take toward reaching my goal?* Whether you ask your question aloud or in the privacy of your own thoughts, please take a kind tone with yourself,**

the same you'd use for a beloved friend. Recall the experience of Patrick, the manufacturing manager who discovered that a hyper, exasperated approach did nothing to produce creative answers.

- **It's a truism in business that a corporation must never grow complacent but must always seek out ways to improve. I often wish that more people would apply this philosophy to their relationships, careers, and bodies, instead of taking these gifts for granted. If you are generally content with your life but would like to remain alert to possibilities for excellence, you can ask yourself a slightly different version of the question above: *What is one small step I could take to improve my health (or relationships, or career, or any other area)?* This question is designed to remain open, to give the brain plenty of room for play. Be prepared for surprising answers!**

- **Often we focus our attention on the people we think are most "important"—a key employee, the problem child, or our mate, leading us to ignore others who may have valuable insights for us. Try asking yourself: *Is there a person at work or in my personal life whose voice and input I haven't heard in a long time? What small question could I ask this person?***

- **This question is for anyone who has a festering conflict with another person, whether a boss, employee, in-law, or neighbor, and is trying to get past this problem. Every day, ask yourself: *What's one good thing about this person?* You may soon find yourself seeing the person's strengths with the same clarity and in the same detail as you do their weaknesses.**

- **If you tend to feel pessimistic or negative, try asking yourself this question: *What is one small thing that is special about me (or my spouse, or my organization)?* If you continue to ask yourself this question over time, you'll program your brain to look for what's good and right, and you may eventually decide to capitalize on these shining aspects, perhaps with a new marketing campaign at work or ideas for family activities at home.**

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CHAPTER THREE

Think Small Thoughts

The easy technique of mind sculpture uses "small thoughts" to help you develop new social, mental, and even physical skills—just by *imagining* yourself performing them!

We are often told that the best way to make a change is feet first, plunging ahead in the hopes that momentum will carry us past fear and resistance. In physical fitness, this idea takes the form of the popular exhortation "Just do it!" In dating, networking, and giving presentations, we're told, "Fake it till you make it." But imagine a shy person who tries to "fake it" by attending a cocktail party solo, giving air kisses to strangers and pretending to feel confident and charming. That person is likely to find the experience so excruciating that she goes straight home to bed with a headache, vowing never to do that sort of thing again.

It may come as a relief to know that there's a nearly painless way to train yourself to perform difficult tasks, even those you think are unsuited to your nature and talents. This method, called *mind sculpture*, can help you run a tough race, go out on blind dates, or talk to employees more effectively.

Mind sculpture takes advantage of cutting-edge neuroscience, which suggests that the brain learns best not in large dramatic doses—*Just do it!*—but in very small increments, smaller than ever believed possible.

Mind Sculpture: A Total Experience

You may already have heard of guided imagery, a concept that predates mind sculpture. Traditionally, psychologists instructing patients in guided imagery would ask them to close their eyes, breathe deeply, and imagine themselves inside a movie theater facing the screen. The patients were then supposed to see themselves on the screen, performing with perfection and confidence whatever skill they wanted to improve, whether it was swinging a golf club or giving a presentation. That kind of guided imagery achieved only limited results. Later, Position Emission Topography (PET) scans confirmed that this exercise lit up just a small portion of the brain, the visual cortex (where visual information is processed).

Mind sculpture, developed by Ian Robertson, is a newer technique that involves total but still-imaginary sensory immersion. It requires its practitioners to pretend that they are actually engaged in the action, not just seeing but hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching. In mind sculpture, people imagine the movement of their muscles, and the rise and fall of their emotions.

My favorite example of effective mind sculpture comes from the extraordinary Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps. With twenty-two medals—eighteen of them gold—Phelps is the most decorated athlete in Olympic history. During his training regimen for the 2008 Games in Beijing, Phelps's coach asked him to practice mind sculpture while still lying in bed. He instructed Phelps to picture himself on the starting block, hearing the signal, pushing off the block, guiding powerfully and smoothly through the water, and making perfect turns at each wall. So, instead of seeing himself on some inner screen, as if he were watching a video clip of his performance, Phelps imagined that he was actually inside the aquatic center, competing in his events. Like those who'd tried guided imagery before him, he used his visual imagination. You can try something similar now by imagining your feet on the starting block, the swim cap fitting snugly on your head, and the roar of the crowd in the stands.

Phelps rehearsed mentally every day before he actually got in the pool. The payoff came when, during one of his events, he had water in his goggles—a problem that could have slowed him down and cost him a victory. But Phelps was prepared, having envisioned this potential snare during his mental imagery exercises. Thus, the gold medal for that event was his, bringing his total golds at the Beijing Games to eight.

Ian Robertson, one of the world's leading authorities on brain rehabilitation, theorized in his book *Mind Sculpture* that during mind sculpture, the brain doesn't understand that it's not really performing the imagined activity. Phelps's brain sent the precise messages to his muscles that were necessary to propel him to Olympic history. In effect, his brain and body were practicing the events, over and over, without mistakes.

Within minutes of "practicing" a task mentally, using all your senses, the brain's chemistry begins to change. It rewires its cells and the connections between the cells to create complex motor or verbal skills. With enough practice the new patterns are mastered. Research supports this idea: In one study, people who practiced a five-finger piano exercise for two hours a day showed a similar increase in brain activity as those who performed the exercise solely in their imaginations—without ever touching a keyboard. In this way, you can approach a difficult task with a purely mental rehearsal, avoiding the unproductive fear

that comes with the “feet-first” strategy. You can train your brain by small increments to develop the new set of skills it needs to actually engage in this task.

Mind Sculpture for the Rest of Us

Many professional athletes, including Michael Jordan and Jack Nicklaus, have used this kind of imagery to improve their skills. But these men were already masters of their games when they used mind sculpture. What about the rest of us, who need help with tasks we find frightening, such as chatting with an attractive dating prospect or sticking to a diet?

This small kaizen strategy is actually perfect for anyone who's struggled and struggled to achieve a goal that remains out of reach. That's because it's such a safe, comfortable step to take that it allows you to walk right past any mental obstacles that have held you back. Mind sculpture is so effective in neutralizing fear that it's even worked for earthquake or accident victims who suffer from flashbacks. They imagine themselves inside the flashback—but they envision a positive resolution. The same goes for people with recurring nightmares: I ask them to relive the dream, but with a happy ending. Dozens of my clients have used this technique, and for each one the nightmare or flashback has vanished within a matter of days.

You might also take inspiration from a woman I met after giving a lecture on kaizen. When she approached me, she was nearly in tears. She suffered from narcolepsy, a disorder in which the body responds to stress by falling asleep. Effective medication was available for her problem, but this woman was unable to take the pills she'd been given. She explained to me that as a teenager, she'd taken a pill (unrelated to her current condition) and suffered terrible, almost life-threatening side effects. She'd been unable to swallow a pill since. When she thinks about pills, her brain runs through the one scenario it knows: a violent set of reactions. I suggested she provide her brain with an alternative to this scenario by *imagining* that she was successfully taking her medication and enjoying its positive effects. This image alone was enough to calm her fear, and after one mind-sculpting session she was able to swallow her pill.

Mind sculpture doesn't always work so quickly, but it *is* quite reliable and versatile. I've seen people use mind sculpture as a way to:

- overcome their fear of medical procedures
- respond calmly in an emotionally charged situation, instead of exploding with rage
- learn portion control
- get past their resistance to fitness routines
- feel more comfortable talking to strangers
- become fluent public speakers

Michael, a supervisor at a large corporation, had a profound experience with mind sculpture that can serve as inspiration for the rest of us. Here's his story:

The human resources department at Michael's corporation came to me with an unusual request. They wanted me to convince Michael to sit down and conduct annual reviews of his employees. Michael had been avoiding these reviews for so long that he was in violation of company policy, but despite consistent pressure from the top and disgruntlement from below, he continued to put off the task. Morale in his department sank, and talented employees expressed interest in transferring to other jobs in the company.

Michael was too valuable a creative force to lose, yet his management skills needed improvement, and quickly.

Michael had been told that cooperation with my suggestions was mandatory. But Michael insisted to me that he was too busy either to conduct the reviews or to devote time to telling me about his objections to them. Michael's position was defensible—his schedule was crushing—but it wasn't completely accurate. I suspected that if he enjoyed the reviews, he'd make time for them. But Michael was a fairly uncommunicative person. He found confrontation with problem employees distasteful, and he couldn't see the reason for "wasting" time reviewing employees whose work was excellent. His was the school of thought that says *no one deserves a compliment just for doing the job right*. So reviews stayed at the bottom of his to-do list. I had to find a way to help Michael change his attitude toward confrontation and discussion, and I had to do it in a way that this chronically overcommitted person would accept.

I struck a bargain with him. "My goal is to get you to the point where you enjoy annual evaluations," I said. "I think I can do this if you give me thirty seconds a day for the next three months. If it doesn't work, you can tell human resources that you followed all my suggestions and fulfilled your obligation." My request was so small that it was impossible for Michael to refuse.

For the first month, Michael was to spend thirty seconds each day performing mind sculpture. I asked him to imagine giving a person from his department a specific, detailed compliment in an enthusiastic tone of voice, as if there were no problems at all with this person's work. He was to imagine how he would stand in front of the person, how it would feel to approach the person with a relaxed, open posture, how his voice would sound, and what any ambient sounds or smells might be.

I wanted Michael to start with compliments for a couple of reasons. Like most people, Michael found it easier to give compliments than criticism. But I also knew that a likely result of letting trouble in his department percolate for too long was that Michael would see his employees as nothing but a collection of problems. And from another perspective, psychological research clearly shows that people who feel underappreciated tend to resent criticism and ignore the advice they're given. By practicing mind sculpture for giving compliments, Michael was not only learning to feel comfortable doing something that felt unnatural to him; He was also developing a skill that would increase the satisfaction and productivity of his employees.

I asked Michael if he'd mind extending this exercise to his family. I suspected that his silence extended to his home life and that his loved ones would appreciate a little kaizen sent their way. I asked him to spend some of his thirty-second periods imagining giving specific compliments to his wife or one of his three children. The next month I asked Michael if he could continue to imagine one compliment but to add one critical comment as well. He was to imagine himself with a specific employee, feeling his own facial muscles moving and his body posture remaining open as he delivered these messages in a kind, matter-of-fact tone of voice. I also asked him to actually give one compliment out loud to someone at home every day.

Two weeks into the second month, my phone rang. "My wife and kids are asking what's wrong with me!" Michael said, clearly pleased with himself. His family had returned his compliments with such love and warmth that mind sculpture and kaizen now had real credibility with him.

"Now," I suggested, "how about calling me once a day and leaving your one compliment and one criticism for an employee on my voice mail?" He could practice his tone of voice that way, and I'd return

the call with feedback about the specificity of the comments and whether his tone had reached the level of neutrality he sought.

Mind sculpture—plus the small, active steps that mental rehearsal enabled him to take—taught Michael a new set of skills. It also gave him a taste for the ease and the rewards of applying them. At the end of our three months together, he conducted the belated reviews without any prompting *and* he found himself stopping in the hallways to give fifteen or twenty seconds of immediate feedback. For several years, I received an annual holiday card from Michael. His family had never been better, the card always said, and department morale was high.

Kaizen Technique

A Mind Sculpture How-To

Whatever your goal, mind sculpture is a terrific way to ease into your kaizen program for change. In true kaizen fashion, I'll break mind sculpture down into several small steps:

1. **Isolate a task either that you are afraid to do or that makes you uncomfortable. Try to give yourself at least a month before you actually have to perform this activity.**

2. **Decide how many seconds you're willing to devote to mind sculpture for this task each day. Make sure you allot *seconds*, not minutes or hours; the time commitment should be so low that you can easily fulfill its requirements every single day. Repetition is essential: Whatever you do repeatedly, even if for only a few seconds at a time, the brain decides must be important and so begins committing cells to the new behavior.**

3. **When you are ready to practice mind sculpture, sit or lie down in a quiet, comfortable spot and close your eyes.**

4. **Imagine that you are in the difficult or uncomfortable situation and looking around you through your own eyes. What do you see? What is the setting? Who's there? What do they look like? See the expressions on their faces, the clothes they are wearing, their posture.**

5. **Now expand your imagination to the rest of your senses. What are the sounds and smells and flavors and textures around you?**

6. **Without moving an actual muscle, imagine that you are performing the task. What are the words you use? What does your voice sound like and how does it resonate through your body? What are your physical gestures?**

7. **Imagine a positive response to your activity. If you are mind sculpting for public speaking, for example, see the audience leaning forward in their seats, looking responsive and interested. Hear the scratch of pencil on paper as some particularly enthusiastic people take notes.**

8. **When your allotted time for mind sculpture has become habitual and even fun, you may find that you are automatically performing the formerly difficult activity with enthusiasm. But if you're not ready for the real thing, that's perfectly okay. Never force the process of kaizen; it works only if you let change happen in a comfortable and easy manner. You may instead choose to increase the time you spend on mind sculpture—but once again, you should increase slowly, perhaps by just thirty seconds. You should increase the length and pace only when the previous stage of mind sculpture has become effortless. If you start making excuses for not practicing mind sculpture, or if you find yourself forgetting to do it, then you need to cut back on the amount of time.**

9. **Once you feel comfortable using mind sculpture for this task (and it may take days or weeks or even longer), imagine a worst-case scenario and how you would respond effectively to it. A public speaker might feel nervous sweat run down his face as he sees the audience members looking bored and hears them whispering among themselves. He would then imagine how he would like to speak, gesture, and feel in that situation.**

10. **When you feel ready to take on the actual task, try out some small steps at first. To continue the public speaking example, consider giving your talk out loud but to an empty room or to an audience of one sympathetic person.**

The First Step . . . or Any Step

You can use mind sculpture in any stage of a kaizen program for change. Many people use it when they know what action they would like to take, but just can't psych themselves up to do it. You may know, for example, that you should eat more vegetables. You might choose to spend fifteen seconds each day simply *imagining* that you are eating—and enjoying!—some broccoli. When this is habitual and even pleasurable, you can increase the amount to thirty seconds—or whatever amount of time appeals to you. (You can then work up to another kaizen strategy, the action of actually eating a floret or two; the kaizen technique of small actions is discussed in the next chapter.)

But like every kaizen strategy, mind sculpture can be used at *any* stage in a program for change. Mind sculpture is perfect for those times when illness or scheduling conflicts leave you unable to pursue a course of action that is already well underway. Even after you've achieved success, you may employ a little mind sculpture whenever you want to take your new skill or habit in for a mental tune-up.

Kaizen Tip

Below are some suggestions for applying mind sculpture to specific goals. And remember this: Small questions are a powerful way to generate ideas for mind sculpture. Just ask yourself: *What is a tiny step I could make to achieve my goal?* Let the question stew for a few days or weeks. When you have an answer, you can use mind sculpture to imagine yourself taking that step.

If you want to learn portion control, imagine yourself at the table. See a plate in front of you with food remaining on it. What does the food look like? How does it smell and taste? Now imagine putting down your utensil, even though some food remains on the plate. How does the utensil sound as it meets the plate? Pick up your napkin from your lap and note its texture. Put the napkin down and hear your chair and feel your muscles move as you push back from the table. Imagine yourself getting up and effortlessly walking away.

If self-directed anger is blocking your path to change, try this: Consider a situation in which you are often judgmental or harsh with yourself. Since it's much easier for most self-critical people to be kind to others, try imagining that you are comforting a friend or a small child who has made the same mistake or has the same flaw you see in yourself. Hear that person saying the damaging things you say to yourself, such as "I'm a bad person" or "I'll never get it right!" Now imagine yourself comforting that person. Experience the love and compassion you'd feel toward someone who is suffering in this way. What gestures and words would you use?

If you'd like to repair a ruptured personal relationship, first think of one thing the other person does to push your buttons, leading you to overreact or to avoid that person. Now picture that person performing the irritating behavior and imagine yourself responding in a manner you'd find ideal. How would your body feel? Would it cool down instead of heating up? What would you like to say and in which tone of voice? What posture would you like to assume?

Many of us need help learning to relax. Choose a recurring scenario that frequently causes you to become irritated or impatient (driving in heavy traffic provokes these responses in many of us). Then imagine yourself in that situation, feeling a sense of internal poise and demonstrating good grace toward others. If you're trying to improve your response to heavy traffic, imagine yourself in the car, your muscles remaining relaxed, your breathing deep and even, and your body cool as the drivers around you honk their horns and behave aggressively. Imagine yourself feeling kindness toward the other drivers—and maybe feel yourself waving to let one of them into your lane!

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CHAPTER FOUR

Take Small Actions

Small actions are at the heart of kaizen. By taking steps so tiny that they seem trivial or even laughable, you'll sail calmly past obstacles that have defeated you before. Slowly—but painlessly!—you'll cultivate an appetite for continued success and lay down a permanent new route to change.

Small actions form the basis of most kaizen programs for change, for an obvious reason: No matter how much you prepare or practice small questions and small thoughts, eventually you must enter the arena of action. This is true whether you plan to hang out a shingle for your new business or confront a difficult family member. But since this is kaizen, your first actions will be *very* small ones—so small that you might find them odd or even silly. That's okay. It's helpful to have a sense of humor when you're trying to change your life. Some wonderful examples of kaizen actions are included in the chart that follows.

Goal	Kaizen Action
Stop overspending	Remove *one* object from the shopping cart before heading to the cash register.
Begin an exercise program	Stand—yes, just stand!—on the treadmill for a few minutes every morning.
Manage stress	Once a day, note where your body is holding tension (your neck? lower back? shoulders?). Then take one deep breath.
Keep the house clean	Pick an area of the house, set a timer for five minutes, and tidy up. Stop when the timer goes off.
Learn a foreign language	Commit one new word to memory every day. If that's too hard, practice repeating the same new word once or twice a day for a week, adding a new word each week.
Get more sleep	Go to bed one minute earlier at night, or stay in bed one minute later in the morning.

These little actions usually sound bizarre to the uninitiated. But if you have struggled to make a big change—to drop twenty pounds, to change careers, or to steady a sinking romance—and failed, then you might appreciate how small changes can help. Remember, big, bold efforts to make a change can be counterproductive. Many of these efforts don't take into account the weighty obstacles that may lie in the path: a lack of time, tight budgets, or a deeply ingrained resistance to change. As we've learned, radical programs for change can arouse your hidden and not-so-hidden doubts and fears (*What if I fail? What if I achieve my goal—and I'm still unhappy?*), setting off the amygdala's alarms. Your brain responds to this fear with skyrocketing levels of stress hormones and lower levels of creativity instead of the positive, consistent energy you need to reach your long-term goals.

Small actions take very little time or money, and they are agreeable even to those of us who haven't laid up bulk supplies of willpower. Small actions trick the brain into thinking: *Hey, this change is so tiny that it's no big deal. No need to get worked up. No risk of failure or unhappiness here.* By outfoxing the

fear response, small actions allow the brain to build up new, permanent habits—at a pace that may be surprisingly brisk.

No Time, No Money? Kaizen Fits Your Life

If you're like lots of other people who want to make a change, you may say to yourself: *But how can I reach my goal? I don't have any money to spare—and I barely have a moment to sit down between breakfast and bedtime!* Take heart. Like all the best things in life, small steps are free. And since they take only a minute or two of your time, they can fit into any schedule. As proof, let me show you how a couple of small kaizen actions—requiring only a few extra moments each day—rescued a medical clinic from financial disaster.

When the outpatient clinic called me, it was in serious trouble. It had a high rate of patient disenrollment, a situation with severe financial consequences. Those patients who did stay on gave it very poor ratings. When patients were asked in written surveys why they disliked the clinic so much, their chief complaint was the long waits.

Now, even if you aren't a medical professional, you probably know that long wait times are a very common problem in doctors' offices. This problem is usually impossible to solve, given the emergencies and unforeseen problems that crop up on a daily basis. A patient initially scheduled for treatment of a skin rash, for example, may happen to mention a separate, more severe symptom such as dizziness or chest pain—and suddenly a routine visit becomes much longer and throws the rest of the day off course.

This problem of timing patients was so tricky and pervasive that the clinic considered some drastic solutions. Staff members suggested investing in expensive software that would supposedly help them manage patient flow and help doctors determine how much time to allot per visit. Another idea was to hire a nurse-practitioner to thoroughly screen patients over the phone in order to accurately determine how long their office visits would take. The doctors even entertained the notion of assigning one doctor solely to walk-in patients—a risky step, since a doctor tied up with walk-ins would not be able to take on the new patients the clinic sorely needed. None of these solutions seemed workable or likely to fit the office's already strained budget. Day-to-day life at the clinic grew tense as different overworked groups—doctors, nurses, receptionists—blamed one another for the dwindling patient rosters and the unhappy "customers."

This clinic faced a real challenge. But I was hopeful, because kaizen has a natural advantage in a medical setting. Within the medical model, the ideal solution is always the smallest effective treatment, the one that works without posing any unnecessary risk. Doctors don't perform surgery if medicine can help, and they don't like to give medicine if simple rest or lifestyle changes will effect a cure. All I needed to do was show this clinic how to recast its business problems according to these familiar, smaller-is-better terms.

I called the staff together and asked them to talk about their best and worst experiences as consumers. Most people talked about broken computers, hassles at the bank, and other problems. Then someone mentioned that his best consumer experience occurred when his telephone service broke down. This was his *best* experience? I asked. What made the experience so gratifying, he said, was that the customer service representative immediately apologized for the problem *and* for the wait to reach the representative. Two days later, the same representative checked in to make sure the problem had been

resolved. Other people agreed that their worst consumer experiences could easily have been turned around by an apology and a demonstration of concern. Everyone knows, they said, that hard drives can break down before they should and that banks can make mistakes. What makes the experience a positive or negative one is what transpires in those few minutes when you explain your problem to the people involved.

The group concluded that patients, like bank customers and computer owners, really do understand that mistakes happen—and that physicians can't always control their time. What patients really hated was that feeling of surrender when they walked in the door, that not only their bodies but their time was in someone else's hands. It was a perfect moment for a kaizen question: *How can you improve the patient's experience of delays in a way that won't cost anything or demand more than a few seconds of your time?*

I wasn't surprised when the staff enthusiastically rose to the challenge. They decided that each of the following steps could easily be implemented in the case of delay:

- The receptionist would personally explain the reason for the wait to the patient and offer an approximate time that the doctor would be available.
- The patient would be offered the alternatives of seeing another physician or rescheduling.
- The nurse or nursing assistant would apologize to each patient who had to wait before being assigned to an examining room.
- The doctor would apologize when walking into the examining room.
- Before leaving the examining room, the doctor would thank the patient for choosing the practice.
- Finally, the receptionist would offer a second thank-you as the patient walked out the door.

These changes consisted of short sentences—mainly "I apologize" and "thank you"—and were undeniably the smallest of steps. But shortly after the staff implemented these changes, patient surveys showed that the satisfaction rate *doubled,* and the number of patients defecting from the practice went down by 60 percent. Keep in mind that the average waiting time remained exactly the same as before. But now patients said things like "I've never felt more appreciated in a doctor's office!" And the previously warring factions within the practice laid down their arms, pleased that there was something simple and productive each of them could do to achieve their goals.

Don’t Small Steps Yield Slow Results?

Kaizen steps may be small, but they can often lead to rapid change. My experience with the clinic shows that sometimes all it takes is one small step to effect a dramatic improvement. And you may find that a single tiny change, perhaps taking just five minutes every night to pick up stray toys and household objects, satisfies your goal of a cleaner house.

When the goal is to perform an activity that you deeply resist (say, exercise) or to give up an ingrained habit (perhaps you shop as a way to relax), you may find that one small step isn’t quite enough. But that step *does* lead you comfortably to a second step and then a third, and so on, until one day you discover that you have mastered the change.

Let’s return to Julie, the single mother who didn’t have time to exercise. She started with a small action—marching for just one minute each day in front of the television. This action didn’t do much for her aerobic capacity, but for Julie it had a different and perhaps even more significant effect. It opened a window to the possibility of fitting exercise into her life. After a couple of weeks, Julie decided she could try marching for the duration of a commercial break. Once she mastered that, she decided she would try for *two* commercial breaks. And then she forgot to stop. The commercials would conclude, the television show would resume, and Julie would find that she was still moving. Almost without realizing it, this extraordinarily busy woman found a way to meet the American Medical Association’s guidelines for thirty minutes of cardiovascular exercise on most days—and to enjoy it. It had become a habit by itself, one that she would begin to miss if she skipped it.

Taking small steps, knowing that you are calming fear and building a new habit, requires trust and optimism. People who struggle with kaizen do so not because the steps are hard but because they are easy. They can’t overcome the cultural training that says change must always be instantaneous, it must always require steely self-discipline, and it must never be pleasurable. We think that if we’re hard on ourselves, exhorting ourselves to do more and to do it faster, we’ll get better results. We say: *How can I get to my goal in one minute a day? At this rate, it’ll take years!* But kaizen asks us to be patient. It asks us to have faith that with small steps, we can better overcome the mind’s initial resistance to change. We do not have control of the timetable for our change—just as we cannot pinpoint the moment we achieved a goal such as learning to drive or ski or play the guitar. We simply have to trust that the mind will develop mastery and obey the instructions we are sending it.

“I Just Can’t Bring Myself to Do It”: How Kaizen Melts Resistance

Every New Year’s Eve, millions of us make a list of our goals for the coming year: We want to lose weight, get organized, learn to manage stress, and so on—and we plan to make these changes, in their entirety, starting the very next day. Yet over and over, we just can’t summon up the willpower required for massive, sudden reformation, at least not for a long period of time. Surveys suggest that the typical resolution is repeated ten years in a row, with one-quarter of these being abandoned within the first fifteen weeks and dusted off again the following year. Kaizen offers an alternative to this annual ritual of failure.

Many years ago, before I learned of kaizen, I heard a very famous pain expert give a lecture to a large audience. Although pain cannot always be managed with medications and other medical inventions, mental techniques like meditation can significantly reduce the suffering of those who hurt. This pain expert encouraged each of his listeners to go home and meditate for one minute a day. Quite surprised, I went up to him after the talk and asked him why he thought one minute of meditation would possibly do anyone any good. In a patient tone of voice, he asked me how long meditation techniques had been around.

“Two or three thousand years,” I said.

“That’s right,” he told me. “So there’s a very good chance that the people in this audience have heard of it before now. Those who like the idea have already found a teacher or a book and are doing it. For the rest of the people in this audience, meditation is the worst idea they ever heard of. I’d rather they go home and meditate for one minute than not meditate for thirty minutes. They might like it. They may forget to stop.”

And I believe he was right. The study of persuasive techniques consistently demonstrates kaizen’s power to melt even the toughest resistance. In one rather humorous study, homeowners in one Southern California neighborhood were asked by volunteers if they would mind displaying a small sign that read “Be a safe driver” in one of their windows. Most of them agreed. Homeowners in another neighborhood chosen for its similarity to the first were not asked to display the sign. Two weeks later, homeowners in both neighborhoods were asked if they would allow a *billboard* bearing the same message to be installed on their front lawns. They were shown photos that made it plain their house would be dwarfed by the billboard. To make the request even less attractive, the lettering on the billboard was poorly executed. The group that had not been approached about the small sign refused the billboard 83 percent of the time; the group that had made the small step in the first neighborhood, however, *agreed* to the billboard 76 percent of the time. The small step made the larger one four times more likely. Other studies have borne out these results, showing that an initial small action (wearing a pin for a charity, watching a stranger’s belongings on the beach) wipes away most objections to a much greater action (making larger financial donations to the charity, interfering if the stranger’s belongings are stolen). Now imagine how efficiently small actions can break down your resistance to a change you really want to make!

I have used kaizen again and again with people who like the *idea* of upholding their resolutions to become slim or organized or more relaxed—but who resist the necessary changes to their routine. In UCLA’s medical practice, for example, I’ve seen people who simply will not, cannot, floss their teeth.

They know they're at risk for tooth decay and gum disease, and they feel they ought to develop a flossing habit, but they can't seem to translate that knowledge into action. So I've asked them to floss one tooth a day. These people find this tiny step much easier. After a month of flossing one tooth every day, they have two things: one very clean tooth and a habit of picking up that silly string.

A clean tooth is an achievement in itself, but most people find that they don't want to quit at this point. Some go on to floss *two* teeth for the next month—but most find that their new habit is growing so strong (and since they're standing in front of the mirror with the segment of floss anyway) that they floss three or four or five teeth. In six to ten weeks, most people are flossing every single tooth. (When people forget to perform their one-tooth-per-day routine, I'll ask them to add another kaizen step: to tie a piece of floss around their remote control, or to tape some floss to the bathroom mirror as a reminder.)

I've also seen more than my share of people who haven't been able to manage regular exercise habits—and who've experienced devastating sickness as a result. These are often people who are overworked, overcommitted, and overstressed. These patients just don't see how they can find the recommended thirty more minutes a day for exercise. Life may be so hard that they can't imagine making it harder by voluntarily working up a sweat. Maybe they're afraid of what their other habits will look like from a new and healthful vantage point. I can certainly sympathize. For these people, the painless and easy nature of kaizen holds a particular appeal.

People who absolutely *hate* to exercise can begin the way Julie did, by just marching in place in front of the television for one minute a day. Soon they create a habit, and they are willing to add a few more minutes to their routine, and then a few more, until they find themselves enthusiastically dedicated to a healthful exercise regimen.

I once met a woman who wished to exercise and had even bought an expensive treadmill for her home. She still found herself avoiding exercise. *I just can't bring myself to do it*, she thought. So she turned to kaizen. For the first month, she stood on the treadmill, read her newspaper, and sipped her coffee. For the next month, after finishing her coffee, she walked on the treadmill for one minute, increasing by a minute each week. During these early months, her small actions would have struck most people as ridiculous. But they weren't, really. She was developing a tolerance for exercise. Soon her "ridiculous" small actions had grown into the firm habit of running one mile each day! Note that this gradual buildup to a steady program is the exact opposite of the usual pattern, in which a person starts off with a burst of activity for a few weeks, but then returns to a comfortable spot on the couch.

As you plan your own small steps toward change, keep in mind that sometimes, despite your best planning, you'll hit a wall of resistance. Don't give up! Instead, try scaling back the size of your steps. Remember that your goal is to bypass fear—and to make the steps so small that you can barely notice an effort. When the steps are easy enough, the mind will usually take over and leapfrog over obstacles to achieve your goal.

Every now and then, kaizen *does* produce change more slowly, requiring small steps all the way from point A to point B. If you find yourself growing frustrated with the pace of change, ask yourself: *Isn't slow change better than what I've experienced before . . . which is no change at all?* One entertaining example of this strategy comes from a woman who grew up in England. At age thirteen she realized that the four teaspoons of sugar she was putting in her daily tea were not doing her body a favor. Through willpower and self-control, she was able to cut out three of the four teaspoons, but the habit of using that

one last teaspoon of sugar was stubborn. When she realized that her willpower wasn't strong enough to resist the final teaspoon, she held the spoon and tried to remove just one grain of the sugar from it before pouring the rest into her tea. The next day she tried to remove two grains of sugar from the teaspoon before pouring the rest in. She continued this, removing one or two more grains each day. It took almost a year to empty the teaspoon! She was forty-five years old when she related this story—and still taking her tea without sugar.

Kaizen Tip

For glowing health, it might be best to set your goals *lower*. Just a few positive changes can have a surprising impact on your well-being. Recent research has strongly suggested that losing 10 percent of one's body weight (assuming a person is overweight to begin with) leads to radical improvements in diabetes risk, hypertension, and sleep apnea. A study at Adelphi University shows that people who used the treadmill just four minutes a day for four days a week (making sure to reach 70 percent of their maximum heart rate), experienced a 10 percent increase in their aerobic capacity—the same percentage as those who exercised twenty minutes a day!

New Year's Resolutions, Kaizen Style

Here are some of the most popular New Year's resolutions, teamed up with a series of kaizen steps that have started several of my clients down the road to success. To decide on the right first step for you, see "Kaizen Technique: What Will Be Your First Small Step?".

Resolution: Eat more healthfully.
Small Steps:

1. Toss out the first bite of one fattening snack. Do this for one month. This process helps you learn to eat less of a large portion.
2. For the next month, toss out the first *and* the second bites.
3. Then toss three bites of the snack for a month (and so on, until you decide you no longer want the snack or until there are no bites left).
4. Once you have given up the snack, focus on slowing down the eating process during other snacks or mealtimes. As you eat, put the food down between bites, placing your hand in your lap and chewing thoroughly. Pick up the food again only when you have swallowed the previous bite.

Resolution: Exercise.
Small Steps:

1. If you can't bring yourself to get off the couch, purchase a hand grip to squeeze while watching television (or squeeze old tennis balls). This will burn a few calories and get you accustomed to the idea of moving your body again.
2. When you're ready to get moving, walk around the block once a day, or take one flight of stairs instead of the elevator.
3. Pass one additional house per day, or repeat one extra step on the staircase until you find the habit growing solid.
4. To further increase your appetite for exercise, think about the activity you would most love to engage in—swimming? skiing? tennis? Find an attractive picture of that activity and place it on the refrigerator, on top of the television, or in the corner of a mirror.

Resolution: Save money.
Small Steps:

1. Set yourself the goal of saving just one dollar per day. One way to do this is to modify one daily purchase. Perhaps you can downgrade from a large, relatively expensive latte to a small, plain coffee. Maybe you can read a newspaper for free online instead of buying one at the newsstand. Put each saved dollar away.
2. Another tactic for saving a dollar a day is to share a daily indulgence with a friend. Buy one large coffee and pour it into two smaller mugs. Buy one newspaper and swap sections.

3. If you save one dollar each day, at the end of the year you'll have $365. Start a list of things you'd like to do with that extra money and add one idea each day. You'll learn to think about far-off, more sizeable financial goals rather than immediate, cheaper pleasures.

Resolution: Meet more people.
Small Steps:

1. Think of one place you might go (perhaps a place of worship, an adult education class, or an athletic social group) to meet people with interests similar to yours. Write it down.
2. Every day, think of one additional location or group and add it to your list. Remember that this is *not* a to-do list; you are simply generating ideas.
3. Think of someone you know who has a full and happy social life. Ask this person where he or she has met friends.
4. If you like the idea of joining a certain club but feel that you're too busy, keep your initial level of commitment very low. You might plan to attend just *one* meeting—and promise yourself to leave after only fifteen or twenty minutes. This will help you build an appetite for social activity without wrenching your schedule.

Resolution: Ask for a raise.
Small Steps:

1. Start a list of reasons you deserve more money for your work. Every day, add one item to the list.
2. Spend one minute a day practicing your request to your boss out loud.
3. Increase this time until you feel ready to make your request in person.
4. Before you actually ask for the raise, imagine that the boss responds poorly—but that you walk out the door feeling successful anyway, feeling proud of your effort. (This step—really a form of mind sculpture—helps you manage any lingering fears.)

Resolution: Use time more productively.
Small Steps:

1. Make a list of activities that take up your time but are not useful or stimulating to you. Watching television, browsing through stores, and reading things you don't find pleasant or productive are frequent sources of poorly used time.
2. Make a list of activities you would like to try that you feel would be more productive than your current ones. Each day, add one item to the list.
3. Once you have identified more-productive activities that you'd like to try, go ahead and give them a whirl—but in a very limited, nonthreatening manner. If you want to keep a journal, do so—but promise yourself to write just three sentences per day. If you'd like to take a yoga class, you might begin by just sitting in the studio's lobby and watching students pass in and out. Soon, you will find yourself participating more fully in your activity. And you'll hardly notice that you're spending less time in front of the television.
4. Each day, write down the name of one person whom you feel is living a productive life. Then write

down one thing that person is doing differently from you.

Kaizen Kicks the Habit

When people are trying to quit an unhealthful addiction, one of their biggest challenges is the likelihood that a brief period of success will be followed by a long relapse into the bad habit. It doesn't matter whether the addiction is to cigarettes, junk food, alcohol, drugs, or something else: Even after remaining free of the addiction for many months, people often slip and return to their old ways. There is hope, however. I have seen many people quit permanently by taking small steps.

I began recommending this particular pattern of kaizen steps for addictions when I noticed a common refrain among smokers who'd given up and then returned to their habit. "Cigarettes are my friends," they'd tell me. Sometimes they were laughing when they said this, but their feeling was real. Many of these smokers, I discovered, grew up in families with parents who were incapable of consistent nurturing. As children, they quickly learned to keep their problems to themselves and to confide in no one when they were upset.

This self-reliance is a frequently used but very poor strategy for coping with life's adversity. That's because we are biologically "wired" to reach out for support when we're stressed; it's in our nature. Consider what a child does when awakened at night by a nightmare or thunderstorm. The child instinctively runs to a parent's bed for help. The child clings to Mom or Dad and then, after a few moments of soothing, falls asleep in the parent's arms. When this natural coping process is interrupted by parents who are physically or emotionally unavailable, it's replaced by self-reliance and stoicism. As this independent child grows into adulthood, cigarettes or food or other substances become dependable companions, providing comfort consistently and reliably—but with the unfortunate side effects of disease, obesity, or worse. If a person like this tries to quit the addiction without learning to ask others for help, that person is unlikely to succeed. Living without this "friend" is just too frightening.

One client, Rachel, was a woman in her mid-forties whose life fit the pattern I've just described: As a child, Rachel determined that she would never lean on anyone. And she didn't. She taught herself to become financially independent, and she was able to manage her home and career without assistance. But she had not developed the ability to receive comfort from others. Rachel could count several friends whose camaraderie she enjoyed, but she never confided in them or revealed herself in a personal way. Her dating relationships were with men who remained distant. But we all need some form of external support, and Rachel's was cigarettes. When things got tough, she'd take her "best friend" outside and smoke. The nicotine lifted her when she was depressed and calmed her when she was anxious.

Rachel came to see me because she knew she needed to quit, permanently. Frequent respiratory problems made this frighteningly clear. Rachel had often kicked the habit for a month or two at a time, but—you guessed it—she always fell back into it.

I knew there was no point in prescribing the latest smoking-cessation technology for Rachel. She clearly possessed the self-discipline to make that first leap onto the wagon. But one of the most solid predictors of success in life is whether a person turns to another human for support in times of trouble or fear. If Rachel really was to succeed, she'd have to learn to trust, to find a human companion and confidante who could replace cigarettes. And we both knew that her health was on the line; in all

likelihood, she didn't have a couple of years to spend in therapy thoroughly discussing her childhood before trying to give up cigarettes again. Nor did she have the patience; I suspected such intense therapy was too big and scary a step for her.

The first small step Rachel took was to call my voice mail once a day. All she had to say was, "Hi, it's Rachel." She was taken aback when she realized this teeny step made her nervous. She then understood its value: If you've spent a lifetime avoiding dependence, the simple act of calling into voice mail violates your promise never to need another person. As this step became less frightening, we added another call just before she smoked a cigarette. This was *not* an attempt to shame Rachel into quitting. We agreed that she could still smoke as many cigarettes as she wanted to—she was just supposed to say hello before smoking. "Hi, it's Rachel!" she'd say. "I'm having a cigarette now!" Because Rachel had learned not to crave human companionship, I was trying to develop Rachel's appetite for it in a way that wouldn't scare her. I was also putting one step between Rachel and her "best friend." We did this for one month.

Then I asked Rachel to write down her feelings in a journal. Research demonstrates that people who use a journal to chart their emotions receive many of the same physical and psychological benefits as those who talk to a doctor or minister or friend. I believe that the reason writing in a journal is so effective is that, for many people, it's a pretty big deal to decide that your emotional life is valuable enough to commit to a book that no one else will ever see. Psychology research suggests that clients are supposed to write in their journals for at least fifteen to twenty minutes a day to receive its benefits, but there was no way Rachel would devote that much time to her inner life. So we began by having her write for just *two minutes* every day. We did this, along with the phone calls, for two more months. Rachel's brain began to think about her journal and me whenever she was upset. At the end of this period, Rachel was surprised to discover her cigarette intake was cut back by 30 percent, without any effort on her part.

Then I asked her to incorporate another kaizen step—small questions—into her routine. She was to imagine that she had a best friend (a human one!) who was by her side all day long, and to ask herself what she'd like the friend to do at any given moment—perhaps listen to her brag about one of her accomplishments or chat with her as she decided what to have for lunch. These questions began to take hold. (For more information about the power of small kaizen questions, see the chapter "Ask Small Questions.") Soon Rachel started to call real people, those friends who seemed worthy of the risk, and she began to have positive experiences as she reached out to them in small ways. Around this time, Rachel went back to the smoking-cessation technique she'd used before. Within a month, she'd stopped smoking. And this time, she didn't stop for just a little while. Rachel has not smoked a cigarette in two years.

Kaizen Technique

What Will Be Your First Small Step?

Here's an exercise I recommend to almost all my clients and that I use myself on an ongoing basis. You can perform this exercise on your own, but I've found that most people are more successful when they bring in a trusted partner to help them. Begin by deciding where in your life you think you can most easily benefit from small, incremental steps toward excellence. Then apply the kaizen technique of asking small

questions to determine your best first step. Suppose you choose health. Have your partner ask you the following:

What small, trivial step could you take that might improve the quality of your health?

Most people will first say something along the lines of "lose weight," or "exercise more often." That's a good start, but losing weight or exercising isn't exactly a small step. In fact, most of us have attempted to apply innovation toward these goals—going on diets, starting a daily running regimen—and failed. Let's try to find a truly small, trivial-seeming step.

Here's where a partner can help. A partner can spot "cheating"—when you come up with an answer that is small and kaizen enough to let you feel you've finished the task, but still large enough to satisfy that raging critic in your head, the one who demands big, bold actions *now*. To avoid this, your partner should ask you the question over and over until your brain produces a true kaizen answer—a step so easy that you can *guarantee* you'll take it every single day.

So your partner asks again:

What small, trivial step could you take that might improve the quality of your health?

A possible answer here is "eat less."

Try again! Vague goals like this will satisfy the demanding, self-critical voice in our heads, but they are hard to achieve and even harder to sustain.

What small, trivial step could you take that might improve the quality of your health?

Avoid chocolate.

This step is more concrete, but it's still too big. Hey, if it were easy to stop eating chocolate, the diet industry would be out of business. Try again.

What small, trivial step could you take that might improve the quality of your health?

Eat less chocolate.

Close, but no chocolate cigar. Notice that by hearing this question repeatedly, your brain is beginning to take it in, turn it over, and come up with more creative answers.

What small, trivial step could you take that might improve the quality of your health?

How about this: Eat the chocolate, but toss out the first bite.

That's it! This is a great way to learn portion control. Your eyes are seeing the whole chocolate bar while your brain is learning to take away part of it before you eat. (Trying to throw out the *last* bite is too hard!) You'll know that the step is small enough if you are as certain you can do it as you are that the sun will come up tomorrow.

Another popular area of kaizen focus is the office desk. People will often answer that they'll spend the first hour of each morning filing papers, clearing off useless junk, and so on. But when I ask them, "Can you guarantee me, no matter how busy you are, that you'll spend an hour organizing?" the answer is no. Eventually, the person decides to spend just *two minutes* filing papers at the end of the day, or maybe just file even *one* paper, or perhaps ask an organized person for *one* tip.

Or how about the goal of reconciling with an estranged parent? Throwing an extravagant reunion event could have a paralyzing effect on both parties. What about having the parent over for dinner instead, or just talking over the phone? Again, the best first step is the one about which you can say: "No matter how scared I am to speak with my mother or father, I know I can do this one small thing." For many people, that first step may be to devote one minute a day to thinking about the parent's positive qualities. Another

first step—useful if a parent is a stern figure of authority—is to spend one minute a day wondering about that parent's fears or insecurities. This small activity helps humanize a withholding mother or father.

By taking care that your first step is truly a small one, you give yourself the best shot at success. Once you've experienced the joy of taking the first step, you can decide whether it's appropriate to take another. You'll know you're ready when your current step becomes automatic, effortless, and even pleasurable. But don't let anyone pressure you into accelerating the pace of change if it doesn't feel right to you. Just use the exercise above to determine your best *second* step, again making sure that you can guarantee the results. And then it's on to the third step, and so on, until your brain overcomes its resistance and speeds you on your way. If you ever feel yourself dreading the activity or making excuses for not performing it, it's time to cut back on the size of the step.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Solve Small Problems

We are so accustomed to living with minor annoyances that it's not always easy to identify them, let alone make corrections. But these annoyances have a way of acquiring mass and eventually blocking your path to change. By training yourself to spot and solve small problems, you can avoid undergoing much more painful remedies later.

In its years of post–World War II rebuilding, Toyota began a bold experiment. One of the company's gifted managers, Taiichi Ohno, changed one of the fundamental precepts of the assembly line. Before Ohno came along, nearly all auto companies followed the same procedure—each chassis went down the assembly line as one worker after another performed his or her function. The workers were to do the single task assigned to them, and that was all. Any mistakes in the process were corrected by quality-control inspectors at the end of the line.

Ohno had a different idea, one that was apparently influenced by Dr. W. Edwards Deming's idea of small, continual improvement. Ohno placed a cord at each step along the assembly line, and any worker who noticed a defect could pull the cord and bring the line to a dead stop. Ohno made sure that engineers, suppliers, and line workers were on hand to fully identify the problem and craft a solution, preferably on the spot.

Every other manufacturer found this idea absurd, a violation of the basic tenets of mass manufacturing. How could a company assemble products swiftly when the line could be stopped on a worker's whim to correct a minor defect?

Contrary to this common wisdom, Ohno's method proved to be the most successful means of building automobiles. Fixing a small problem on the scene prevented much bigger problems later. Sadly, though, not every business has learned from Toyota's experience, and the temptation remains strong to gloss over what appear to be minor problems. The oil and gas company BP, for example, ignored 356 "small" oil spills that occurred between 2001 and 2007. Regulators twice issued concerns, but experts from the petroleum industry dismissed them. It wasn't until 2010 that BP was forced to recognize the consequences of ignoring these "small" warnings: That was the year when an explosion aboard the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig caused 200 million gallons of crude oil to be pumped into the Gulf of Mexico—becoming the worst oil spill in history.

A curious but true rock 'n' roll legend shows the power of implementing small, kaizen measures to achieve excellence and prevent costly mistakes: Van Halen's contracts with concert promoters demanded not only that a bowl of M&Ms be provided backstage prior to its performance, but also that all brown M&Ms be removed! If any were found in the bowl, the concert would be cancelled but Van Halen would still be paid.

At first glance, this appears to be nothing more than an example of a rock band's narcissistic excess. Van Halen's tours were among the first to bring highly technical, very complex stagecraft to venues. Their legendary lead vocalist David Lee Roth says, "We'd pull up with nine eighteen-wheeler trucks full of

gear, where the standard was three trucks. And there were many, many technical errors. When I would walk backstage, if I saw a brown M&M in the bowl, we'd line-check the entire production. Guaranteed you're going to arrive at a technical error. Guaranteed you'd run into a problem." Yet how many times have we, in our haste to reach a goal, spotted signs of trouble—and then recategorized them as "normal," just to avoid facing them?

When we are trying to make a change, it can be tempting to ignore the subtle warning signs, ones that say: *Something's wrong here. You need to slow down, retrace your steps, and investigate.* But if we continue to avoid these small problems, they will grow and grow until we create a mess so spectacular that we are required to stop the assembly line of change, announce a recall, and proceed with the painful and time-consuming process of undoing the now-big mistake. Focusing on the small mistakes now can save us years of costly corrections.

Kaizen Technique

Learning to Spot Small Problems

Hindsight, as they say, is 20/20, and it's always easier to spot a crack in the ceiling *after* rain has soaked the plaster. But it's possible to train yourself to see small warning signs more clearly. Try these exercises to sharpen your small-problem vision:

1. **Recall a major mistake you've made at some point in your life. Now, take some time to consider whether there were small signs along the way indicating that things were not going according to your plans or wishes. What measures did you have to take to correct the problem? Did you halt your "assembly line" and start all over? Did you ignore the problem in the hopes you'd achieve your result on time anyway?**

2. **Identify one small mistake you have made today, without becoming angry with yourself for making this mistake. This single act, especially if you perform it daily, will raise your awareness of small mistakes.**

3. **Now ask yourself whether the small mistake you identified in exercise 2 reflects a larger problem, or if it has the potential to gather velocity. (If you misplaced your car keys, for example, ask yourself if you are trying to juggle too many things at once, or are so distracted that you might eventually make a more serious mistake.) By paying attention to this mistake, you will reduce its frequency. If you feel this mistake indicates a more significant problem in your life, ask yourself: *What kaizen step can I take to correct this situation?***

4. **Ask yourself whether there are ways in which you irritate your family, friends, co-workers, or customers. Your new awareness alone reduces the probability that you will make this mistake again, but you should also ask yourself whether this mistake is part of a bigger problem. If you can peg the error to a larger issue, you'll give yourself further incentive to work on it!**

When Failure Isn't an Option

Most of us would strongly prefer not to fail, but for some people and corporations, failure means more than the account balances dipping into the red or dashed personal ambition. It can mean loss of life, perhaps on a massive scale. Psychologists have examined the strategies used by organizations that cannot afford even a single error, and their findings are illuminating for each of us, no matter how high or low the stakes of our daily endeavors.

One of the most interesting studies comes from Dr. Karl E. Weick, a psychologist at the University of Michigan's business school. His subjects were workers in emergency rooms, aircraft carriers, air traffic control towers, nuclear reactor centers, and fire engine companies. He called these groups "high-reliability organizations," or HROs—meaning that their services are so vital and precise that they are all forced to find ways *not* to fail. One common characteristic of these well-functioning teams, said Dr. Weick, is that they "distinguish themselves by being able to detect incredibly weak warning signs and taking strong, decisive action."

For example, the pilots who take off and land from the decks of U.S. Navy aircraft carriers are handpicked for their flinty nerves and unflappable judgment. There are many highly technical, automatic controls to help ensure safe trips as well. But when you're landing planes atop a ship in the middle of the ocean, one error, even a tiny one, could spell disaster. Officers and crew are trained *not* to assume the system will run perfectly on its own. Instead, they look for the slightest signal that things are going awry. They listen for subtle signs of tension in pilots' voices when they circle the ship to dump excess fuel. They walk the ship many times a day looking for "foreign objects"—anything that could be sucked into the jet's engine—basing their scrutiny on the assumption that anything that can go wrong, will. They also devote rigorous attention to the nature of each landing. On the deck of the aircraft carrier, there are four arresting wires that can catch the plane's tailhook. A pilot strives not to catch the first or second wire (because it would mean they'd landed too soon) or the fourth (which is unnervingly close to missing the deck and falling into the ocean). The third wire is ideal. Those landings that catch the first, second, or fourth wires are reviewed so that the pilot and crew can spot and correct the causes of the deviation.

We can all implement high-reliability strategies for ourselves, bringing this kind of meticulous attention to life's faint warning flares. A few years ago, I was teaching a weekend course on creativity when I met Amy and Frank. Over the course of the three-day session, I got to know this husband and wife fairly well, and at one point Amy volunteered that she wished Frank would see me for treatment of his road rage. Her husband agreed that he yelled at other drivers too often (and since they lived in traffic-clogged Los Angeles, there were plenty of opportunities for it) but felt that the problem was too small to warrant a psychologist's attention.

I suggested to Frank that this seemingly insignificant problem was worth his attention. Excellent studies have suggested that people who respond to life's challenges with anger are *seven* times more likely to die prematurely from heart disease than those with the same lifestyle (including similar exercise and dietary habits) but different temperament. I also pointed out that if Frank was sitting in his comfortable car—one that he'd equipped with all the latest entertainment options, with the woman of his dreams beside him—

and still could not find a way to enjoy the ride, he may have trouble creating happiness during the bigger challenges life would inevitably send his way. Why not use the car as a classroom for learning to control his moods and his focus?

The cardiac-risk statistics were a wake-up call for Frank. I suspected that his new awareness alone would put a damper on his angry responses while driving. I also thought he might benefit from a strategy I use in UCLA's program to reduce cardiac-risk behaviors: Each time he got behind the wheel, Frank was to perform one small favor for another driver. Now, instead of tensely surveying the road for "jerks" who might cut him off, Frank's focus was on finding an opportunity to wave another driver into his lane. (Another technique is to play soft music instead of listening to the news, so that your mind is being relaxed instead of stimulated.) Before long, Frank reported that his patience and good humor were at an all-time high—and not just in the car. And he was grateful to Amy for spotting his "small problem" early on.

But I realize that Amy may have been unusually eagle-eyed about spotting small problems and intuitively recognizing their significance. For those of us who aren't working under the pressure of the life-and-death situations faced by HROs, it can be hard to see the little irritations—let alone appreciate their potential for wreaking major havoc. Let me show you three circumstances in which *all* of us are especially likely to miss life's small problems. Then you can compensate for them with extra vigilance, just as you compensate for blind spots in your car with mirrors and frequent visual checks.

"Confront the difficult while it is still easy; accomplish the great task by a series of small acts."

—Tao Te Ching

Blind Spot Number One: At the Beginning of Your Path to Change

Laurel came to me because her marriage was in deep trouble. One of her bitterest complaints was her husband's lack of empathy. If a friend called with a problem, he had almost no interest in his or her plight. He resented the time and energy Laurel gave to her own family. This often led to fierce arguments about the time she spent either helping people or socializing, activities she considered normal and appropriate. She'd noticed his lack of empathy when they first started dating, but she had been eager for a committed relationship and assumed, mistakenly, that this unpleasant trait would improve.

I'm not suggesting that you apply overly rigid standards to potential friends or mates (recall my client Grace, who refused to date men who couldn't dance or whose jobs weren't prestigious enough), but it's unwise to turn a blind eye to characteristics you find downright unlikable. More vigilance might have helped Laurel and her husband negotiate their differences early on, before their marriage cooked itself into a stew of anger and resentment. For this reason, I'm pleasantly surprised when dating couples come to me with a small problem in their relationship. Often they apologize for bothering me, but I respond by saying, "Hey, it's a *good* sign that you're clear-sighted enough to spot the small problems and that you value your relationship enough to work them out."

Of course, this is true for nonrelationship issues as well. If you feel pain in your knee while stepping out for your first fitness walk, do you really want to ignore it? By slowing down your pace or cutting down on the distance you cover (or seeing a doctor if the pain persists), you may prevent serious injury. If you want to become an interior decorator but are chronically late for your design classes, shouldn't you ask yourself whether you are truly committed to this career?

Laurel's story has a happy ending. She realized she bore some responsibility for their current problem, since she'd committed to her husband despite his undesirable trait. This enabled her to approach him with more kindness, patience, and even curiosity. Her husband found this new frame of mind so inviting that he was willing to join her in therapy, where the three of us could work on their troubles together.

Blind Spot Number Two: Near the Finish Line

One of my consulting clients, a large hospital chain that was looking for a new chief executive officer, illustrates the difficulty in sensing danger when a goal is in clear view. It was a time of upheaval and crisis in the organization, and the board of trustees decided to hire someone with a decisive, take-charge attitude. Its members were delighted when they found a qualified, confident candidate. They were so thrilled to find themselves within inches of the finish line that they did not ask me to perform my usual evaluation. As the board urgently debated whether to make an offer to this candidate, I was able to intrude on their deliberations only long enough to ask a single question: "What questions did the candidate ask each of you?"

The board members could recall almost no questions from the candidate. Instead, she seemed already well-informed about the company and focused on selling herself and what she had to offer. I suggested that this was a dangerous sign, as the new CEO would need to listen to many people before deciding what to do. Her lack of curiosity suggested an unwillingness to listen, a penchant for action over understanding, and an inclination to demand obedience rather than to inspire. The board members listened to me politely, but the pressure to act was intense. They quickly offered the job to the candidate, and she accepted.

In the next six months, the new CEO did untold harm. She alienated a highly motivated and talented staff who felt ignored by her edicts. She issued demands that demonstrated a lack of understanding about her employees. For example, she wanted weekly reports of how people were spending their time, adding what the staff perceived as extra busywork on top of their regular reporting forms. In a more disturbing move, she cut back on the number of nursing assistants, despite protests from her staff. A few weeks later, a patient died whose death might have been prevented by adequate staffing. The resulting lawsuit and settlement would have paid the fired nursing assistants' salaries many times over.

The CEO's failure to listen and to think through issues—a failure that might have been predicted, based on the small problem exhibited during her interview—turned out to be a literally fatal mistake. However inconvenient it would have been to continue its search after having come so far in the interview process with a promising candidate, the board would have been better off admitting to itself that she wouldn't work out and starting from square one.

Kaizen Tip

These warning signs frequently pop up. Don't ignore any of them!

- *Disturbing traits in a new dating partner, such as rudeness to waiters or drinking a little too much.* Every time I see someone at the end of a relationship, I ask, "Did you have early warning signs of a problem—perhaps bad temper, indifference, or substance abuse?" Almost every time, these people admit that, yes, they had seen evidence of this flaw by the third or fourth date. Of course, it's not wise to reject anyone who has the tiniest flaw (otherwise, we'd all be lonely), but you can ask yourself: *Is this person aware of the problem? Will he or she take responsibility for it and work to correct it? Does this small flaw point to bigger issues that we need to discuss?*
- *Less-than-stellar skills in a job applicant.* When you interview an applicant who doesn't quite meet your performance standards but whom you're tempted to hire out of a desperate need for *any* warm body to fill the slot, slow down and reconsider.

If you don't have a surplus of other applicants from which to choose, and if the candidate is otherwise well qualified, develop a fuller sense of his or her abilities by undergoing three or four more interviews. Be sure to bring up the shortcoming and note how the candidate responds. The *Harvard Business Review* has reported that it's much more efficient to leave a position empty than to fill it with the wrong person.

- *Angry or critical self-talk*. By this I mean the internal voices that say, *Why don't you just give up? You're never going to be smarter or richer or thinner*, as discussed in the chapter "Ask Small Questions." It's a myth that this kind of harsh self-treatment will goad us into better performance. In reality, it stimulates the fight-or-flight response (discussed at the beginning of this book) and stops progress in its tracks. You can quiet these voices by bringing your awareness to them—and by taking the small steps of kaizen, which are designed to calm the stress associated with change.
- *Small, persistent signs of pain when exercising*. It's perfectly normal to experience muscle fatigue and soreness during a workout and afterward, because the body builds muscles by tearing them down. (If you begin an exercise program with small kaizen actions, you probably won't get much or any soreness at first.) But if you experience pain in your joints or if your breathing becomes very labored, it's time to cut back and maybe take a few days off. By pushing through the pain, you may create a serious injury that derails your fitness plan. If the pain persists, or if you ever feel chest pain while working out, see a doctor.
- *Any resistance to the small step you have chosen*. The challenge is to make the step so small that it is effortless. If your inner voice is harsh and angry at you for not making the change sooner, it will demand a bigger step than may be practical. Remember, you are counting on the repetition of the small step to "program" the brain for the life changes you wish to make. Even small signs that you are resisting the small step—that you are having to push yourself to do the step—are an indication that the step is too big, inviting the amygdala and the harsh voice to awaken and interfere.

Blind Spot Number Three: An Overwhelming Crisis

Sometimes it's hard to spot small problems because, paradoxically, the damage they inflict can be so great that we assume the source of such horror must lie in deeply complicated troubles. This is true for marriages, careers, addictions, corporations, and even for worldwide health disasters.

Many Americans are unaware that diarrhea kills a million children around the world each year. To put this number into perspective, that's the equivalent of a jumbo jet full of children crashing every four hours. Global health-care experts and governmental organizations have attempted to reduce its occurrence through large-scale, costly solutions, such as delivering improved plumbing systems to the beleaguered areas or introducing oral rehydration therapy to the medical facilities that serve these children. These efforts are laudable and useful, but they demonstrate a blindness to one very small problem that leads to diarrhea: dirty hands. In the countries where fatal childhood diarrhea is most prevalent, soap is usually present in the house, but only 15 to 20 percent of people use it before handling food or babies. When people keep their hands clean, diarrhea cases can be reduced by more than 40 percent. It is easier to teach a person to prevent diarrhea by washing his or her hands than it is to install new plumbing across a continent or to supply a therapy *after* the disease has taken hold.

A happier example can be found in New York City's approach to crime. In the 1980s, there was a yearly average of two thousand murders and six hundred thousand felonies. In the subway system alone, riders and workers fell victim to fifteen thousand felonies per year. Frustrated politicians and police officials tried again and again to reduce major crime with bold steps, raising the number of cops on the beat, increasing budgets, and so on. They assumed that since crime had attained such outsized dimensions, only the splashiest, most costly techniques could deflate the statistics. But, despite great expense and effort, crime continued to rise.

Enter William Bratton, who was hired in 1990 to reduce New York's subway crime. Bratton's philosophy was influenced by a lecture he'd attended on the "broken windows" theory, first postulated in 1982 by two criminologists, James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling. The broken windows theory held that if a city—or a neighborhood or a street—tolerated minor infractions of the law, it was practically inviting more serious offenses. Wilson and Kelling observed that when kids threw rocks at a vacant building and broke one windowpane, and that windowpane was not fixed, the remaining windows were soon broken as well. But if the initial broken window was repaired quickly, vandals stayed away and the rest of the windows remained intact. This scenario was emblematic, Wilson and Kelling believed, of a larger truth about crimes: People are more willing to break the law in neighborhoods where small crimes go unnoticed or unpunished. If no one in the neighborhood is able to handle a drunk who is loud and disorderly, will any of the citizens even attempt to interfere with a mugging or call the police during a robbery?

When Bratton arrived in New York in 1990, he brought this kaizenlike philosophy with him. Resisting what must have been extraordinary pressure to apply radical, showy solutions to the problem of subway crime—a problem that plagued millions of responsible citizens as they rode to and from work each day—Bratton isolated small problems instead. He decided to focus on the petty crimes that eroded the quality of

life for transit passengers but did not put them in physical danger. These crimes included urinating in public, vagrancy, and turnstile jumping. Imagine Bratton's bravery in telling cynical and angry New Yorkers that he was going to focus on turnstile jumping instead of homicides. But he held to his plan.

Instead of staging massive but infrequent roundups of criminals, Bratton had his officers arrest turnstile jumpers day in and day out and keep fifteen or twenty of them at a time handcuffed in the subway station—where other passengers, not television crews, could see them. This had a dramatic effect not just on small crimes but on major felonies as well. When police ran background checks on the turnstile jumpers, they often found criminals wanted for violent offenses. And it also became clear that would-be muggers were inhibited by the crackdown. Apparently, they weren't willing to pay for the privilege of riding the subway and robbing people.

One of Bratton's district captains, Miles Ansboro, found himself solving another small problem. He wanted passengers to notice his officers' presence and to feel safer, but no one even looked up as his uniformed officers walked by. So he asked himself a small kaizen question: *What makes people look up on a subway car?* His answer was: the loudspeaker. Every time a train came into the station, one of Ansboro's sergeants handed a card to the conductor to read over the public announcement system: "Your attention please. The Transit Police are conducting a sweep of the train. There may be a momentary delay while they go through the train to correct all conditions. Thank you for your patience." The officers greeted the passengers, escorted the rowdy and the drunken off the cars, and settled down any kids who were misbehaving. Small problems, small questions, small actions—and to the city's collective astonishment, the rate of major crime in the subway system dropped by 50 percent in just twenty-seven months. Bratton was promoted to Chief of Police for the City of New York, and in that position he produced the same extraordinary results aboveground.

(I will also note that kaizen was not the only strategy at Bratton's command. He proved himself capable of radical change as well, dismissing more than 75 percent of the city's precinct commanders and beginning a sophisticated computer operation to target high-crime areas. The small steps of kaizen and the giant leaps of innovation are not mutually exclusive; used together, they become a formidable weapon against even the most profound, complex, and apparently unsolvable problems. When people are up against a thorny problem they've been unable to resolve, I generally advise them to focus on kaizen first. Once they understand small steps, they find that they've developed an intuitive sense for when innovation is appropriate and how to mix the two.)

When we face personal crises, the kaizen strategy of solving small problems offers consolation and practical assistance. If we are involved in a lawsuit, or fall ill, or find that the economic tides are leaving our business high and dry, or our partner is falling out of love with us, we cannot fix our circumstances with one quick, decisive moment of innovation. During these crises, the only concrete steps available are small ones. When our lives are in great distress, even while we are feeling out of control or in emotional pain, we can try to locate the smaller problems within the larger disaster, and perhaps apply any or all of the kaizen techniques to move us slowly in the direction of a solution. But if we are blind to the small, manageable problems, we are more likely to slip into despair.

I encountered this despair face-to-face when I met Becky, a fifty-five-year-old woman who'd been planning an early retirement from her corporate job. She'd hoped to fulfill a lifelong dream to become an artist. As I came to know Becky, she showed me her paintings and sculptures. She was indeed gifted.

But when Becky had recently gone in for a routine physical, her doctor discovered a lump in her throat. The diagnosis: Becky had cancer. She was frightened and angry. By the time she was referred to me, she had cut off all communication with family and friends and was completely overwhelmed by the demands of the doctors, the disease, and the routines of her daily life. The oncologist had laid out her treatment options, but making an informed choice seemed like just another burden. Becky was reluctant to see me, saying: "I just can't deal with any more doctors' appointments." She grudgingly agreed to let me help—but only if it would take just a few minutes a day.

I asked Becky to tell me her goal for this period of her life. We agreed that her primary goal was to be rid of the cancer, but since neither of us felt we could control the disease process, I asked her to list two more. She said, "I want to make the best of each day that I have, and I want to get more chores done." By "chores," she specified doing all the paperwork for her HMO, keeping up with her office job, and maintaining her house as best she could. Here was a series of challenges that were small relative to the cancer, but they made a tough time even worse.

I knew that Becky needed help with her chores. She had too much on her plate for even a healthy person to handle. Becky was excellent at giving help to others but fearful of receiving it, and the more she needed help, the harder it was to ask for. So we took some small steps toward helping Becky welcome friends back into her life. Each morning, Becky wrote a list of chores. She put a star next to each chore with which she'd like to have assistance and described the specific help she'd like.

This daily listing of the chores kept Becky from sinking into denial and confusion, and the wishful thinking about the ideal assistance kept her focused on asking for help in a safe manner. In our following sessions, I did not encourage or suggest that she actually ask friends to help her, but I did compliment her as the list got more and more creative. The list at first was brief, with items such as "I wish a friend would just say, 'You are so brave'" or "I wish a friend would do my laundry." Within a week, the list became more detailed and emotional. "I wish a friend would sit with me while I deal on the phone with the HMO or fill out their paperwork," she wrote. "I wish a friend would go to the Wellness Community [a local support group for people coping with cancer] and find out what it is like. I wish a friend would hold me when I am crying."

On her own, Becky slowly began to reconnect with her parents and her closest friends, and the seeds of the wish list bore fruit. Even when her treatments sapped her energy, she grew calmer and more in control of her day-to-day life. I saw Becky a few months ago, when the treatments were long over and the cancer had been in remission for several years. We talked about her health for a while, and then she stopped me. "Thanks for the gift of kaizen," she whispered.

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CHAPTER SIX

Bestow Small Rewards

Whether you wish to train yourself or others to instill better habits, small rewards are the perfect encouragement. Not only are they inexpensive and convenient, but they also stimulate the internal motivation required for lasting change.

Small rewards are not only *sufficient* as an incentive to get a job—especially a dreaded task—done, but they are *optimal*. This is true whether the reward is used as part of a corporation-wide initiative or in your personal life.

Let's look at that much-maligned corporate tool, the employee suggestion box. In the best of worlds, suggestion programs function much like Taiichi Ohno's pull cord on the automobile assembly line, as discussed in the previous chapter: They encourage employees to look for and report problems that are visible from the ground. In Japan, employee suggestion programs are a wildly popular kaizen technique, with nearly three-quarters of employees responding. Yet in the U.S., these suggestion programs—sometimes consisting of a literal box on the wall, sometimes a more formal affair—have a dismal rate of participation, usually achieving no better than 25 percent in the best of situations. In Japan, 90 percent of employees' ideas are adopted, but American companies implement only 38 percent.

Why the difference?

Intrinsic Motivation

The main distinction between American and Japanese suggestion programs is the size of the rewards given to participating employees. In the U.S., employees are usually given large cash rewards in proportion to the money their suggestion saves the company. This is a well-intentioned, even commonsensical approach, but it fails nearly every time. It encourages employees to focus only on ideas that are big and grand enough to produce large financial rewards. In reality, few of us are able to come up with bold ideas, and even fewer can produce suggestions that actually work. Under this system, smaller ideas that may be more practical or useful—but that don't yield instant financial payoffs—are neglected.

But in Japan, the value of the average reward is $3.88 (as opposed to the American average of $458.00). For the best suggestion of the year, Toyota gives a reward called the Presidential Award, bestowed upon the recipient at a formal ceremony. This coveted reward isn't a fancy watch, a new car, or a shopping spree. It's a fountain pen. And it's such an effective reward that Toyota chairman Eiji Toyoda boasts, "Our workers provide 1.5 million suggestions a year and 95 percent of them are put to practical use."

Rewards as a valuable psychological tool are nothing new. They've been a part of the academic vocabulary since the mid–twentieth century, when behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner articulated his philosophy of "positive reinforcement," a way to shape behavior via reward systems. What's unusual about the kaizen approach to rewards is their size.

Japanese executives love small rewards not because they're stingy (although kaizen does encourage us to value cost savings), but because they utilize a basic tenet of human nature: The larger the external rewards, the greater the risk of inhibiting or stunting the native drive for excellence. Big, fancy prizes remove what Dr. W. Edwards Deming, one of kaizen's most passionate advocates, called "intrinsic motivation." Dr. Deming understood that most people *want* to be proud of their work and want to offer useful contributions. But big cash prizes in the corporate world can send the message that an employee is a cog in the machine who must be whipped into a frenzy by the possibility of personal gain. Large rewards can become the goal in and of themselves, usurping an employee's natural desire to find stimulation and creativity in the work alone. Moreover, once the large reward is in hand, a person's motivation to continue the new and desirable behavior tends to fade or disappear.

But small rewards encourage internal motivation because they are really a form of recognition rather than material gain, signaling that the corporation or boss appreciates the employee's internal desire to improve and contribute. Southwest Airlines cannily bestows this respect by rewarding good performance with a five-dollar food voucher. Their employees reward one another with written "Love Reports." If these incentives remind you of grubby candy held out to children, try asking your co-workers or friends: "What makes you feel appreciated?" The resulting list is usually studded with free or low-cost items such as hearing the boss say "thank you," receiving a compliment from a superior, or having someone bring them a cup of coffee when they're working late.

In private life, small rewards show gratitude while preserving the natural sense of pleasure in a job well done. If they are employed in a friendship or marriage, they can be used with a sense of humor, so

that both the rewarder and the rewardee maintain equal footing. Since many of us suffer from jammed schedules and financial strain, it's a kind of reward itself to know that someone took the time to say thanks.

I knew one couple in which the husband was at high risk for heart disease. His wife had attended his checkup and heard the doctor plead with him to cut down on foods like french fries. The wife knew that this would be difficult for her husband, so she asked him if he'd like her help. She'd been exposed to kaizen during one of my talks, and she was wise enough to realize that a really big enticement, like a new watch, would lead to a power struggle. She'd have the right to bestow the reward—and he would have to work to earn it. That's not a great dynamic in a marriage. And once the watch was purchased, she wondered, would he have any incentive to continue his good habits?

Instead, the wife thought about what small reward would suit her husband. She knew that he was pressed for leisure time; they had two small children to feed and bathe and put to bed in the evenings, and he often brought work home to boot. Hanging around, just enjoying himself, was not part of the evening plan. So she invited him to think of some activity he'd like to do but that he felt was too indulgent. He decided that he'd like to watch a little television. And so every time he went without french fries or similar foods at dinner, he earned fifteen minutes with his feet up, watching whatever TV program he liked. They laughed about their funny little system, but it stuck, and he was able to improve his diet significantly.

MANY THANKS, MATE!

What's the most common reason people leave the U.S. Navy? It's not the notoriously low pay or the long months at sea. When sailors decide to reenter private life, their biggest complaint, according to a study reported by Captain D. Michael Abrashoff in his book *It's Your Ship*, is feeling underappreciated at work. To keep their ranks full, many top naval officers are now consciously bestowing small rewards in the form of compliments and public recognition.

"No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted."

—Aesop, "The Lion and the Mouse"

Small Rewards: Where Do They Fit into Your Plan?

The couple above used small rewards as the principal kaizen element in their plan for change, even though the husband preferred to make the change—giving up fat-filled foods—all at once, instead of breaking the process down into small kaizen actions (for example, removing one fry from his plate before eating). That's perfectly fine. For this husband-and-wife team, one small reward was enough.

In fact, small rewards have an especially useful place when incremental steps just aren't possible. This is often true when, say, a pregnant woman must give up smoking or when a boss demands instantaneous results at work. I love sharing the example of Karen Pryor, who was a trainer of whales and dolphins before she turned her skills to land mammals in her book *Don't Shoot the Dog.* At one point in Pryor's life, she was working all day and attending graduate school at night. After a long day at work, she found it hard to motivate herself to spend an hour on the subway, three hours in class, and a long hour on the subway home. But even if she'd wanted to try very small kaizen actions—just walking to the subway station and then going home, or just standing on the platform every evening for a week or two—they simply weren't practical. By the time she grew comfortable with her schedule, the semester might well have been over.

Instead, Pryor broke her journey down into a series of distinct segments—walking to the subway station, changing trains, taking the stairs to her classroom. Each time she completed a segment, she allowed herself a square of chocolate. In this way she was training herself to associate each segment of the journey with pleasure. "In a few weeks," she says, "I was able to get all the way to class without either the chocolate or the internal struggle."

But you can also use small rewards as part of a more complete kaizen program. While giving a presentation at the Canyon Ranch spa in Arizona, I met a businessman named Jack Stupp. Over a long career, Jack had instinctively—and shrewdly—used kaizen to build up his multimillion-dollar catalog-sales business step by step. But at age fifty-four, he'd developed severe rheumatoid arthritis and was hospitalized with more than twenty swollen joints. Every moment was misery. Confined to a wheelchair and taking multiple painkillers, Jack was advised under no circumstances to consider exercising. As Jack told me his story at Canyon Ranch, I grew curious. He showed no obvious limitations from his rheumatoid arthritis; he was clearly mobile and exercised every day. How had he overcome his disorder?

He attributed his success to small steps and small rewards. Each morning, when he awoke in pain, he'd tell himself that all he had to do was just get out of bed. When he was standing upright, Jack would give himself a mental pat on the back: "Atta boy, Jack!" he'd say. This compliment, short but sincere, was his reward. Then he'd say to himself: *If I can just walk down the street to the gym, I'll enjoy a chat with the staff there.* Once on the treadmill, Jack started by walking for just two minutes, rewarding himself with praise and encouragement. Minute by minute, and small reward by small reward, Jack slowly worked himself into physical fitness. By the time I met him, he was in his seventies and had won the Mr. World bodybuilding contest for his age division!

There are plenty of terrific ways to incorporate rewards into a kaizen plan. One client of mine lists the chores she does not want to do; if she completes these chores, she rewards herself at the end of the day by

getting in the hot tub for ten minutes. Other people who are trying to change a behavior, such as lighting up a cigar after dinner, will get a five-minute back or foot massage from their partner instead. This not only rewards them for not smoking; it also helps take their minds off the cigar during that vulnerable time.

Kaizen Technique

The Perfect Reward

Think hard before deciding on a small reward. You want the reward to have these three qualities:

- ***The reward should be appropriate to the goal.*** **For Karen Pryor, chocolate was a perfect encouragement to get to class—a small, harmless indulgence. But for the man told by his doctor to cut back on unhealthful foods, chocolate would be counterproductive.**

- ***The reward should be appropriate to the person.*** **If you're trying to encourage another person to achieve a goal, remember that one person's reward is another person's annoyance. For some people, it's a great boost to receive a compliment every time they take a positive step toward their goal. Others think that frequent compliments are condescending. For certain clients, especially those who are hesitant to contact me outside of our scheduled visits, I use phone calls as a reward: Every time they achieve a small success, they call me so that I can congratulate them. Needless to say, this reward would be meaningless for those clients who feel entitled to call their therapists any time of the day or night!**

Finding an appropriate reward for another person can be challenging, so you might want to try this technique: If the person in question is a friend or partner, ask, "How do you know you are loved?" Ask him or her to come up with four or five answers if possible. Since most people are not used to answering this kind of question, allow a few days for mulling it over. At work, you could ask a colleague or employee an alternative question: "How do you know you are appreciated?" Again, give the person a few days and ask for several responses. The answers are often small and invariably illuminating.

- ***The reward should be free or inexpensive.*** **You may need to look no farther than your living room. People with all-consuming family lives often find that ten minutes a day with a book or newspaper is a treat. I've known several stay-at-home moms who would like to relax in front of a little daytime television but feel compelled to perform chores instead. If losing weight is one of their goals, I usually suggest they grant themselves permission to watch TV—as long as they are exercising in some way while it's on.**

If you tend to be your own worst critic, you might try an honest self-compliment as your reward. Other good ideas include taking soaks in the tub, taking short walks, playing your favorite piece of music, making a phone call to a friend, getting a shoulder or foot massage from your partner, or taking a few moments to drink your morning coffee in the luxury of bed.

"Most of us miss out on life's big prizes. The Pulitzer. The Nobel. Oscars. Tonys. Emmys. But we're all eligible for life's small pleasures. A pat on the back. A kiss behind the ear. A four-pound bass. A full moon. An empty parking space. A crackling fire. A great meal. A glorious sunset. Hot soup. Cold beer. Don't fret about copping life's grand rewards. Enjoy its tiny delights. There are plenty for all of us."

—from an advertisement for United Technologies Corporation

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Identify Small Moments

The kaizen approach to life requires a slower pace and an appreciation of small moments. This pleasant technique can lead to creative breakthroughs and strengthened relationships, and give you a daily boost toward excellence.

One example of kaizen that struck me powerfully is illustrated in the book *Plagues and Peoples* by William McNeill. McNeill makes a dramatic case that plagues have done more to shape the course of human history than any other single factor, even though they have been virtually ignored in history lessons. But more to the point, buried in the book are a few short paragraphs about how the plagues were cured.

I had thought, as perhaps you do, that the way to cure a disease is to focus on the people who have the disease, subject them to whatever technology we have or can invent, and eventually stumble onto a cure. The reality is that many of the plagues were cured by a very different process. Smallpox, for example, one of the greatest killers of all time, was cured by a British physician, Edward Jenner. He noticed that a group of women—milkmaids all—did not get smallpox. At first, no one paid him any attention—they had known of this coincidence for years. They had bigger things to worry about. But Jenner's appreciation of this commonplace fact led him to a revolutionary discovery. He brilliantly surmised that these milkmaids had earlier been sick from cowpox (an occupational hazard), and that their exposure gave them what we would now call an immunity to smallpox, which is very similar to cowpox. This theory led him to perfect the technique of vaccination. Other diseases, including cholera and malaria, were cured the same way—that is, by looking at who *didn't* get the disease and trying to figure out why.

Jenner's story challenges the popular belief that change and progress spring from instantaneous flashes of insight. A philosopher, scientist, or artist sits alone in his garret, agonizing, until—Eureka!—divine inspiration strikes. But many great moments of progress come out of a workaday attention to the little things. I'm talking about moments that may seem ordinary or even tiresome, but actually hold the seeds of important change. Paying attention to small moments may sound easy, but it takes respect, imagination, and curiosity. Here are just a few examples of how small moments have engendered excellence—even revolution—in business:

- An American Airlines flight attendant took the time to notice that many of her passengers did not eat the olives in their salads. She thought this observation might be useful and passed this observation up the chain of command. It was eventually discovered that the airline was charged by its food supplier for salads based on the number of items they contained. The cost for a salad with one to four items was less than a salad with five to eight items. And the uneaten olives, it turned out, were the fifth item in the American Airlines salad. When the airline dropped the olives and switched to a four-item salad, it saved five hundred thousand dollars a year.
- The president of 3M once noticed a letter from a customer asking for samples of the "mineral grit" the company used in its sandpaper. The president, William McKnight, was curious about this odd request and contacted the customer to find out more. The resulting information and collaboration led

to waterproof sandpaper and other products that helped make 3M a world-class organization.

- In 1892, the president of American Express, J. C. Fargo, was traveling in Europe carrying a letter of credit so that he could obtain additional cash should he need it. At that time, such letters were the only way to obtain cash while traveling, but their effectiveness was limited. Fargo later explained: "The moment I got off the beaten path, they were no more useful than so much wet wrapping paper. If the president of American Express had that sort of trouble, just think what ordinary travelers face. Something has got to be done about it." What he created out of his attention to an inconvenience was the traveler's check—the precursor to the now-universal credit card.
- A Swiss engineer named George de Mestral was out walking his dog when he noticed burrs sticking to the dog's fur and to his own clothes. De Mestral allowed the tenacious little burrs to intrigue rather than merely irritate him; his attention to this everyday moment led him to invent Velcro.
- Dave Gold, the owner of a liquor store, paid extra attention to an effect already well known to retailers: "Whenever I'd put a 99 cents sign on anything, it was gone in no time. I realized it was a magic number. I thought, wouldn't it be fun to have a store where everything was good quality and everything was 99 cents?" Gold went on to create the 99¢ Only Stores chain, which now numbers 332 stores.
- While on vacation with his family, inventor Edwin Land took a picture of his three-year-old daughter. She expected to see the picture right then and there. Instead of brushing off her impatience as childish and unrealistic, Land saw a possibility. Five years later, the first instant camera was invented.

What's keeping *you* from seeing creative possibility in olives, mineral grit, and a child's complaint? Even if you're not interested in using kaizen to start a multimillion-dollar business, small moments can help you see through a mental block. Take George, a police officer who hated his job but just couldn't think of a more suitable career. I asked him to find one moment each day when he enjoyed his police work. As he wrote down these small moments, he noticed a pattern. He felt most satisfied when he talked to prisoners in the squad car, asking them about their problems and giving them advice. He even loved to go back to the jail after the prisoner was booked—just to continue the conversation! It didn't take long for George to see what had been right under his nose for so long: He wanted to become a counselor. George is now taking psychology courses at night. And his police work is more interesting now that he sees he's gathering experience toward his new career.

When you're implementing a plan for change but find yourself bored, restless, and stuck, look around for hidden moments of delight. People who are most successful at improving their health habits are those who can transform exercise or eating well into a source of excitement and pride. My clients have taught me that this holds true for other goals as well. So don't assume that happiness will arrive with your size 6 jeans (or your newly robust marriage, or your organized closet). Instead, focus on the moments of change that bring you pleasure. I know it sounds tough, but most people are able to come up with at least one moment they've enjoyed. "Well, on my walk today I remembered just how pretty my neighborhood is," people will say. Or "I was eating an apple today and remembered working in the orchard for my uncle. I had so much fun that summer!"

"The true creator may be recognized by his ability to always find about him, in the commonest

and humblest thing, items worthy of note."

—Igor Stravinsky

Kaizen Technique

Cultivating Awareness of Small Moments

It takes curiosity and an open mind to see the promise of small moments. By cultivating these qualities, you'll improve your chances of recognizing creative potential—whenever it happens to spring up in your path. Here's a series of steps to help your mind stay open, playful, and alert to small moments, even in emotionally charged situations.

1. **Look for a person who has the opposite opinion from you on hot-button social policy issues, such as abortion, gun control, or school vouchers. It is helpful if this person is a stranger—say, someone sitting next to you on an airplane—rather than a close friend or family member.**

2. **Engage this person in a conversation in which all you do is ask questions with only one agenda: to discover and understand the reasons for his or her point of view.**

3. **Try not to argue, persuade, or sound judgmental.**

4. **You will know you are succeeding when you feel the person becoming more and more relaxed and chatty as he or she perceives your interest and respect.**

Relationships: A Series of Small Moments

Kaizen forms the foundation of strong relationships. Moment by moment, we discover each other and build trust.

When he was a professor of psychology at the University of Washington, Dr. John Gottman conducted a study in which volunteer couples each moved into a special condominium that was a laboratory for observing their behavior. The "natural" interactions of these couples were observed as they went through their daily routines; the subjects were also periodically hooked up to monitors to record any biological changes as they discussed areas of conflict or other matters. This is an unorthodox setup for a scientific study, to be sure, but what makes us take Gottman seriously are his remarkable results. With these measures, he has been able to predict—*with 93 percent accuracy*—whether a couple would be happily married, or miserable, or even divorced within four years.

One of the study's major findings was that in the successful relationships, positive attention outweighed negative on a daily basis by a factor of five to one. This positive attention wasn't about dramatic actions like throwing over-the-top birthday parties or purchasing a dream home. It took the form of small gestures, such as:

- using a pleased tone of voice when receiving a phone call from the partner, as opposed to an exasperated tone or a rushed pace that implied the partner's call was interrupting important tasks
- inquiring about dentist appointments or other details of the other person's day
- putting down the remote control, newspaper, or telephone when the other partner walked through the door
- arriving home at the promised time—or at least calling if there was a delay

These small moments turned out to be more predictive of a loving, trusting relationship than were the more innovative steps of romantic vacations and expensive presents. Possibly, that's because small moments provide consistent tending and nurturing.

"To be really great in little things, to be truly noble and heroic in the insipid details of everyday life, is a virtue so rare as to be worthy of canonization."

—Harriet Beecher Stowe

"Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world."

—Desmond Tutu

Another application of kaizen to relationships is allowing ourselves to be interested in the small details of our partner's life. Instead of expecting our mates to entertain us with dramatic gestures and stories, we can try to appreciate their everyday qualities and actions. When people tell me that they are bored in their current relationships, I suggest that they try kaizen. You may wish to do this as well. Train yourself to

focus on the small, positive aspects of your partner. Instead of focusing on the big flaws, or waiting for a horse-drawn carriage ride or trip to Paris, appreciate him or her for small gestures, a pleasing tone of voice, or a kind touch.

One mistake many people make during this process is to praise their partners only for their actions. "You're such a good cook," we say, or "you did a great job trimming the hedges." But if your partner receives compliments only for the services he provides, he may begin to feel like an employee. Instead, try to identify one moment each day during which you can praise your partner's personality or appearance. Try "I love the way your hair looks in the morning," or "I love how excited you get on the way to the movies." Acknowledging these small moments reassures your partner that she is loved as a person, not just as a homemaker or breadwinner.

> ***"Turning toward your spouse in the little ways is also the key to long-lasting romance. Many people think that the secret to reconnecting with their partner is a candlelight dinner or a by-the-sea vacation. But the real secret is to turn toward each other in little ways every day."***
>
> —John Gottman

Focusing on small moments is both easy and hard to do. I am reminded how easy it is when I watch children play and learn. They are absolutely focused in the moment, so able to take pleasure and be absorbed in their activities and their friends. As their brains develop, two other capacities come on board. One is the ability to recall the past, and the other is the ability to anticipate the future. These were crucial additions to our survival tool kit as a species. The ability to remember in which direction our enemies were seen and anticipate what problems could be encountered with them was crucial. But these two new skills usually mean we all spend a bit too much time dwelling in the past and worrying about the future. Through kaizen, we can regain more of that precious quality of childhood: the ability to take pleasure in the moment, to become fascinated with those around us and whatever we are doing.

Kaizen Tip

Most of us spend so much time dwelling on the past or anticipating the future that we miss small moments. Whenever you find yourself lost in worry or regret, try this:

1. Ask yourself: *Do I need to learn to change anything based on this worry or regret of mine?*
2. If the answer is yes, then take a step toward that change. If the answer is no (and often it is), scan the room for an object or person that gives you the strongest sense of pleasure. Focus your thoughts on this item for thirty seconds. This process trains your brain to live in the moment.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Kaizen for Life

As you experience success in applying kaizen to clear goals like weight loss or career advancement, remember to hold on to its essence: an optimistic belief in our potential for continuous improvement.

I hope I've convinced you that kaizen is a powerful method for achieving clear, stand-alone goals or fixing troublesome behaviors. The beauty and the challenge of kaizen is that it requires faith. Not necessarily religious faith, or a rigid and unthinking commitment, but a belief in the power of your body and brain to carry you where you need to go. By taking small steps, you set your mental compass in a new direction, allowing your mind to do the rest.

This faith often takes the form of a gentle, patient attitude in the face of challenges. It doesn't matter whether those challenges are seemingly insurmountable or tediously mundane. If you are having trouble committing to a rigorous health-improvement plan, begin by flossing a tooth or two, or washing your hands carefully before one meal. If you want to feel happier and more peaceful, start in your car, giving the drivers in front of you plenty of space and consideration. If you want to have more love in your life, perform a small, loving act each day for a friend, acquaintance, or stranger. If your desire is to unleash your creative potential, try asking a new question of yourself each day. Await the answers with both anticipation and trust.

Instead of aggressively forcing yourself into a boot-camp mentality about change, give your mind permission to make the leaps on its own schedule, in its own time.

Although kaizen is a potent force for career advancement, weight loss, improved health, and other goals, it is more profound than simply a tool for crossing the finish line. Try to see kaizen as a process that is never done. Don't put it in a drawer, forgotten, once your goal has been reached. Kaizen invites us to see life as an opportunity for continuous improvement, for ever-higher standards and expanding potential. When kaizen was first adopted on the eve of America's entry into World War II, the intent was to enhance manufacturing quality. At that time in the U.S., manufacturing wasn't a broken industry; it successfully turned out high-quality goods at a very respectable speed. Kaizen was used when the impending war made it necessary for this system—which already worked—to work even better.

Just as a record-setting marathon runner will continue to search out ways to shave another second off his or her best time, you can seek out strategies to constantly sharpen your life's game. If you take an extra moment to show excitement about a young person's artistic or intellectual efforts, you may help that child discover the joy of learning. If you spend a minute or two each day writing a kind note to tuck into a loved one's briefcase or a child's lunchbox, you may save yourself the heartache that comes when relationships grow cool from a lack of nurturance and daily care. If you wish to maintain standards of physical health that are already high, have fun with the small opportunities to take one more set of stairs or eliminate a few more junk calories.

If you *really* want to play, consider how the world might be different if more of us conducted our social, business, and romantic lives with the belief that small steps matter, that even the shortest contact

with another person is inherently important. Kaizen offers the possibility that through small acts of kindness, and even small moments of compassion and curiosity, we can change ourselves—and, eventually, humanity. We can focus on being generous in daily thoughts and actions, so that we don't hoard our kindness for some important person or event, but spend it freely when our children anger us or when an employee deserves a small compliment. We can respect ourselves by taking small steps toward improving our health and relationships; we can respect others by asking them small questions. This is not easy to do, and only you can determine the place of kaizen in your world. But as you incorporate kaizen into your routines and discover its power, you will have begun to answer a profound question:

What more important task does this life hold than to draw out the possibility in each moment?

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